UNKNOWN Worlds

25c FEB · 1942
FANTASY FICTION

THE UNDESIRED PRINCESS . . . by L. Sprague de Camp

She was Good, Beautiful, and Intelligent—as all good princesses should be. But because she was a princess of a world of Aristotelian logic, where a thing is either 100% true or 100% false—she gave the hero a severe case of inferiority complex. When she was good and intelligent, she was most frightfully good and most frighteningly intelligent—

DESIGN FOR DREAMING . by Henry Kuttner

Concerning the Hollywood script writer who, seeking a vacation, got mixed up in his destinations. Instead of the Elysian Fields, he wound up in what was practically —for him at least—Hell. He got into the dimension of the dream-script writers, writing scenarios for all the world's dreamers—

ETAOIN SHRDLU . . . . . by Fredric Brown

The little man from Somewhere wanted to use a linotype machine for a little while—just long enough to set up certain special characters. But when he'd finished setting that up—the linotype had a will of its own, an unstoppable, terrific urge to set type endlessly—

HE DIDN'T LIKE CATS . by L. Ron Hubbard

The small man had one large aversion—cats. A mousy little fellow ordinarily, with a thorough and vicious pleasure he murdered one large and ownerless alley cat. The cat, however, came back; it came back that night with an unfair advantage.

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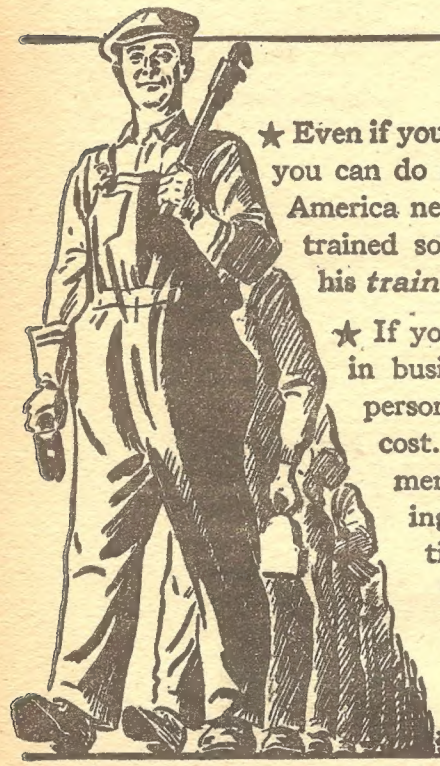

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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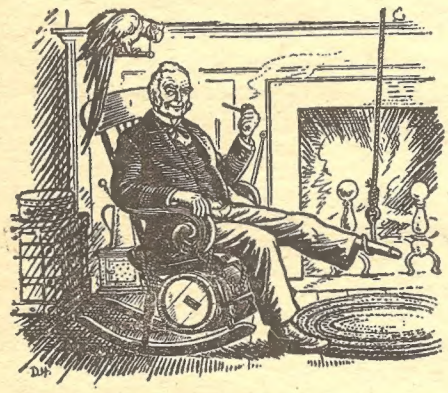

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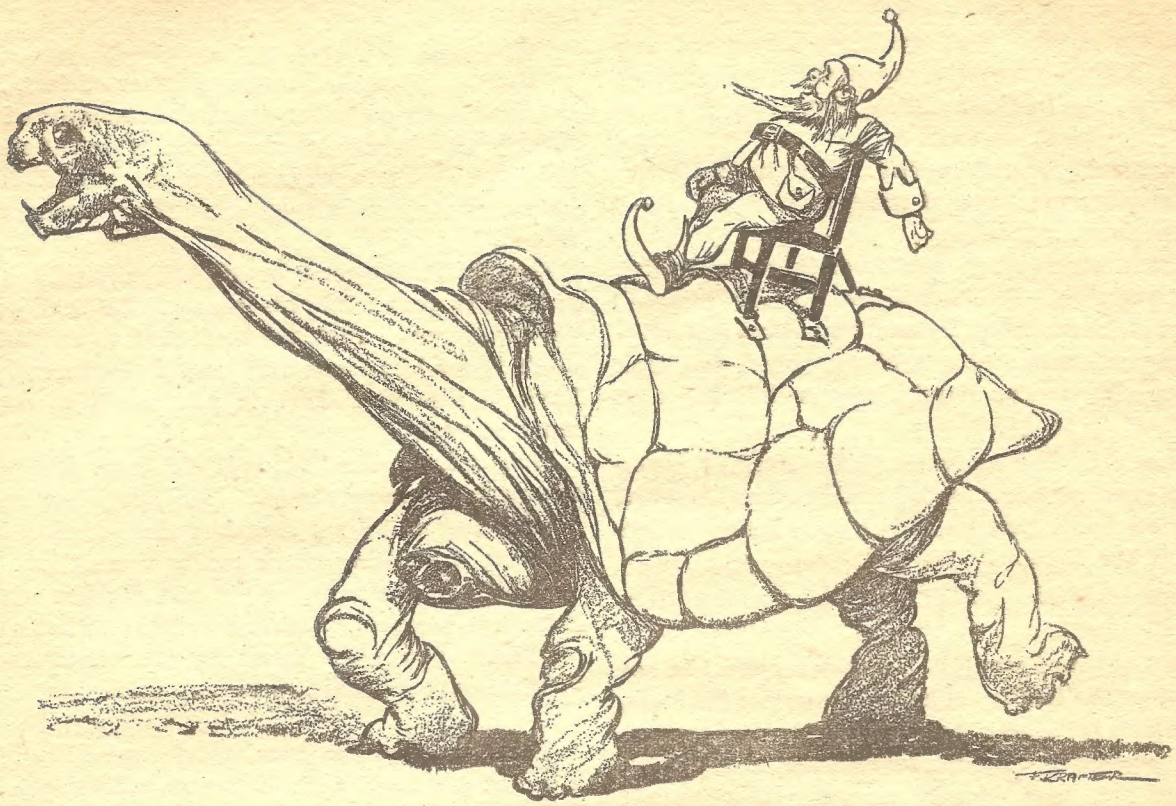

THE UNDESIRED PRINCESS

By L. Sprague de Camp

● A highly logical yarn, concerning a super-logical sort of world, where things were true, or not true, and never merely mostly so—Like the princess. She was good, beautiful and intelligent. And she gave the hero an inferiority complex—

Illustrated by Kramer

Rollin Hobart looked up from his flow-charts through the haze of smoke and said: "Come in." When the door opened, he added: "Hello, George." Pause. "Didn't you say something about bringing a friend?"

George Prince answered the hello. He was a young man of no great importance either in the world wherein he lived or in this story, so there is no point in describing him. He added: "He'll be along. My gosh, Rolly, don't you ever do anything in the evenings but work?"

"Sometimes. Who's this friend?"

"He's name's Hoimon."

"Hermann?"

"No, Hoimon. H-O-I-M-O-N."

"Hoimon what? Or what Hoimon?"

"Nothing; just Hoimon. H-O—"

Hobart gestured impatiently. "Heard you the first time. *What* is he?"

"He calls himself an ascetic."

Rollin Hobart frowned, or rather the already permanent crease between his eyebrows deepened. He was a rangy, large-boned man, young but not very, with slick blond hair, a narrow, straight nose, and narrow, straight lips. "Listen, George, I'm sorry, but I haven't time to admire your eccentric friends. I've got to figure how to save these guys three-quarters of a cent per ton."

Prince answered: "This one's different. You'll see. Oh, by the way, have you changed your mind

about the party tomorrow night yet?"

"Nope. I told you, work."

"Oh, my gosh. You don't go anywhere any more." Prince shrugged hopelessly. "I suppose that now the strike-breaking business isn't so hot—"

Hobart straightened angrily. "Higgins & Hobart are *not* strike breakers. I thought I explained—"

"How about that—"

"It isn't our fault if our investigator exceeded his instructions. It was his idea to hire those—"

"Yeah," interrupted Prince, "but you and Higgins knew Karsen was a hard egg when you took him on. So you're partly responsible for that riot—"

"Not at all. You know the judge decided, when Karsen sued us because the strikers had knocked out all his teeth, that he hadn't been acting as our agent at the time."

Prince laughed. "That was the *funniest* darn thing—"

Hobart grinned wryly. "To you, maybe, but not to those on the inside. The company lost business, the strikers lost their pay, we lost our fee and the legal expenses, and Karsen lost his teeth. My point just was we were legally cleared, so we're not strikebreakers. Q. E. D. We're consulting engineers, and it's only natural that our clients should consult us about their labor-relations problems."

Prince replied: "The trouble with you, Rolly, is that you're a black-and-white thinker; everything either is so or it isn't. That's Aristotelian logic, which has been long since exploded. You'd made a good Communist if you hadn't got started in life as a shell-back conservative—"

Hobart gave up all efforts to concentrate on his engineering figures and pitched into his friend: "You're the black-and-white thinker, my lad. Because I accidentally get associated with a strike-breaker, I hate the poor toiling masses; and from the fact that I think that permanently unbalanced budgets mean trouble either for individuals or governments, you infer I'm a hidebound reactionary! The trouble with you guys who dabble in social theories is that you invent a lot of pretty laws and expect the world to conform to them—"

"I only said—" interjected Prince. But Hobart, once started, was not so easily stopped.

"And you're wrong about Aristotelian logic's being exploded," he continued in an authoritative rasp. "All that's happened is that it's been recognized as a special case of the more general forms of logic, just as plane trigonometry is a special case of spherical. That doesn't mean it's useless; it's just more limited in its application than was once thought. We could hardly conceive a world where Aristotelian two-value logic did apply generally; for instance, everything would have to be red or not red, so nothing would be pink or vermilion—"

"Speaking of which, my friend—"

"I'm not through, George. Matter of fact, Plato did have some glimmering of the concepts of continuity and multiple causation, which Aristotle missed. If Plato hadn't been so full of foggy, idealistic mysticism—what's that about your friend?"

George Prince, caught off balance, took a few seconds to get back in his groove. He finally said: "Well . . . uh. . . it's kind of hard to explain. I don't know him very well, and I don't really believe in him yet. But, if you see him, too, he must be real."

Hobart frowned. "I should think so. But what's the matter—seeing things? Too many hot rums?"

"Yes and no. I see him, but the question is am I seeing something that's really there?"

"That's ought to be easy," said Hobart with an impatient gesture. "Either he's there or he isn't—"

"There you go!" cried Prince triumphantly. "Either-or! I knew . . . uh . . . come in!"

They stared at the door, which opened to reveal a gaunt old man with unkempt white whiskers. This individual wore an overcoat that Hobart recognized as belonging to his friend Prince. As far as one could tell, that was all the oldster had on; below its hem extended a pair of hairy shanks ending in large, calloused bare feet. He carried a rectangular, wooden object with hinges and snaps, about the size of a suitcase.

Hobart asked Prince: "Is—this—your—Mr.—Hoimon?"

The apparition himself answered in bell-like tones: "It is true, O man, that my temporal name is Hoimon. But kindly do not use the term 'mister.' I am informed that it is derived from 'master.' Such an epithet is most repugnant to my humility; I do not wish to have superiority over any living thing ascribed to me."

"Well," said Rollin Hobart, flustered for the first time in a couple of years. "George, what's—"

"Hoimon will explain, Rolly," answered Prince.

Hoimon smiled a sweet, patient smile. "May I?" he tolled,

"Uh . . . oh, sure!"

The old man unsnapped the clasps of his wooden contraption and unfolded it, whereat it was seen to be a collapsible bed of nails or spikes. Hoimon set the thing down with a solid, wooden sound, shucked off the overcoat—under which he wore a towellike piece of textile around his middle—and settled himself at length on the spikes with a luxurious sigh.

For some seconds he sprawled silently. His eyes swept Hobart's room, taking in the shelves of textbooks, the adding machine, the large iron dumb-

bells, and the photograph of Frederick Winslow Taylor on the wall.

When he spoke, it was to Prince: "O George," he said, "is this man indeed possessed of a keen and logical mind?"

"Keenest and logicalest I know," replied Prince. "One of M. I. T.'s best. Least, when it's something he's interested in. Outside his special fields you'll find him a bit narrow-minded. F'rinstance he thinks Wendell Willkie's a wild radical."

Hoimon waved aside the question of Mr. Willkie's radicalism. He asked: "Is he intact physically?"

"If you mean is he healthy, yes. I think he's had his appendix yanked—"

"Look here," snapped the subject of the discourse, "what's the idea—"

Hoimon ignored him, and spoke again to Prince: "And his departure would not wreak grievous harm or sorrow on those near him?"

"Guess not. Some of his friends would say they wished old Rolly was around to lend his crushing ironies to the conversation, but they wouldn't go into a decline on account of him being gone. He's a good, steady sort of a guy, but not exactly *gemuetlich.*"

Hobart cleared his throat, and interjected: "What my misguided young friend means, Mr. Hoimon, is that I value my independence."

Hoimon gave him merely a brief glance, and inquired of Prince: "He has, then no wives or offspring?"

"My gosh, no! You ought to hear him on the subject—"

Rollin Hobart, who had been polishing his glasses in a marked manner, now interrupted: "George, I admit you pique my curiosity with this ingenious nonsense. But I've got work to do; this defense boom isn't going to last forever, and Higgins and I have got to make hay. When I want a character analysis I'll go to a psychia—"

"He is also, I see," boomed Hoimon, "a person of strong and determined character. He will do, I think. But one more thing: is he adept at the solution of paradoxes?"

Prince looked blank; Hobart frowned, then grinned a little. The engineer remarked: "Now, how did you know I was a puzzler? Hobby of mine, as a matter of fact." He picked a small, white magazine entitled *The Enigma* out of a pile and handed it to Hoimon. "I was president of the National Puzzlers' League last year. Haven't time for that sort of stuff now, though. What is it I'll 'do' for? Solving a paradox?"

"Precisely," responded Hoimon. "It is without doubt by the providence of Nois that I was led to the one man in the three-answer world who can best assist us. Arise, O Rollin, and come with me to Logaia. There is not a minute of your finite time to be lost!"

"What the hell?" scowled Hobart. "What sort of gag?"

"I have no intention of gagging you," said Hoimon, folding his bed of spikes. He turned piercing, blue eyes on Hobart. "Do not haver and quibble, O Rollin. The life of the fairest, wisest, and best depends on you. Already the androsphinx draws nigh unto the Stump of Sacrifice."

"But!" cried Hobart, "what's Logaia, who's this fairest et cetera, what's—"

"All will become clear," said Hoimon calmly. Though he was standing a good ten feet away, his free arm shot across the room like a chameleon's tongue and grabbed Hobart by the coat collar of the latter's conservative brown business suit. The indignant Rollin was hoisted out of his chair and across his desk. He swung a pair of knobby fists, but Hoimon held him dangling just out of reach.

"George!" yelled Hobart. "Stop him! Get a cop! He's a nut!"

Prince registered indecision. He said: "Hey, Hoimon, if he doesn't want to go, you got no right—"

"That will do, O George," rumbled Hoimon. "It is not for you to judge. It is but natural that one of his character should resist. Waste not your breath in shouting, as this room is now part of Logaia. By my spiritual perfection I have caused it to be so, temporarily."

Prince stepped across to the window and looked out. He turned a blankly dismayed face. "Hey, there isn't *anything* outside!"

"Of course not," said the ascetic, dodging an extra-long punch that Hobart threw at him. "Will you open the door, O George, as my hands are occupied?"

"Well . . . I—"

"Open it!" roared Hoimon.

Prince obeyed, asking hesitantly: "Hey, Hoimon, how can a skinny old guy like you do it?"

Hoimon replied: "My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure. Farewell, O George. Danger awaits your friend, but also opportunity. We go!"

"Help!" screamed Hobart. "My glasses!"

"You have them on, O Rollin." And the ascetic, with the folding bed of nails dangling from his left hand and a struggling Rollin Hobart at arm's length from his right, marched out the door.

As the darkness closed around him, Rollin Hobart tried to slip out of his coat. But Hoimon had gathered a considerable fold of shirt and vest into his iron grip. Hobart felt for the ascetic's fingers and tried to wrench them apart, but he might as well have tried to twist the tail of one of the New York Public Library's lions.

The environment through which he was being

hauled was not the hallway outside his spick three-roomer, but a dark tunnel. The light from the door of his living room picked out sides and roof of rock. Then this feeble illumination went out sharply, as though George had closed the door. Hobart thought of the folly of keeping up with lightweight friends whose sole virtue was that they were fun to argue with.

Hobart continued his struggles long after it was obvious that they were getting him nowhere. When he finally stopped kicking and clawing it was from exhaustion. His relaxation allowed his mind to take in the implications of the tunnel.

He gasped: "What—is—this, the fourth dimension?"

Hoimon spoke softly behind him: "Talk not, O Rollin, lest you draw the cave-folk nigh."

"Oh, is that so? Well, you answer my questions or I'll raise a hell of a holler!" Hobart filled his lungs to shout.

Hoimon conceded: "In that case I must speak, lest you ignorantly bring disaster upon yourself. Not that the cave-folk would harm me, but you—"

"All right, get to the point! What's the idea of this kidnaping?"

Hoimon sighed. "I fear you resent the high-handed tactics I was forced to use—"

"You're damn tootin' I resent 'em! The F. B. I.'s going to hear about this! Now what—"

"I was forced to use, and therefore, unless you abandon your hostility, I shall be forced to punish myself, oh, most grievously, for having laid constraint upon a living creature. I would not have considered a course so out of keeping with my humility, had it not been necessary in order to avert a greater evil. Know, O Rollin, that by the ancient curse laid on the Kings of Logaia . . . hark!"

Hoimon broke off, and Hobart kept his silence for the nonce. Through the darkness came a shrill sound, like the highest note of a violin; a spine-tickling cry.

"The cave-folk!" breathed Hoimon. "Now we must hasten. If I put you down, will you accompany me in orderly fashion? You cannot return to your own world in any case."

"I'll walk," grumbled Hobart. "What d'you do, unscramble the dimensions?"

"As I am no scholar, I cannot fathom your talk of dimensions. All I know is that by my purity of heart I have acquired powers, said to have been possessed by certain philosophers of yore, of visiting strange universes like yours, where the laws of reason hold not and naught is what it seems."

"What d'you mean, the laws of reason don't hold?"

"In your world the earth appears to stand still while the sun goes around it, but I was assured on good authority that the reverse is the case. In Logaia, when the sun seems to go around the earth, it really does so. Let there be more progress and less talk."

The shrill wail came again, lending more speed to Hobart's legs than exhortations from his abductor would have done. A spot of daylight appeared ahead; soon they arrived at the exit, and stood on the crest of the fan of detritus that spread out from the mouth of the tunnel. Hobart swiveled his head, blinking. The sun was high in the brilliantly blue heavens. All about were mountains, steep and conical, and, somehow, not quite right. After a few seconds Hobart saw what was wrong with them; they were too regular and too much alike. They reminded him of a lot of ice-cream cones—that is, the cone part without the ice cream—placed upside down in regular rows on a flat table.

"Come," said Hoimon. The ascetic bounded down a steep trail, swinging his folded bed of nails, his long, white hair flapping behind him. Now that Hobart got a look at his kidnaper in daylight, he saw that the saintly slave raider was not at all a clean person. But for a man of his apparent years he was uncommonly agile. Probably, thought Hobart, the result of some screwy diet of nuts and lettuce. The engineer followed, fascinated by the way the towel about Hoimon's equator stayed in place by the most precarious of frictional holds.

They reached the bottom of the steep slope. The mountains were a phony-looking golden yellow; so was the scanty grass. An occasional shrub had leaves of a bright blue. Yes, *blue*, thought Hobart after a pause to peer. Well, if they were blue they were blue. He contemptuously dismissed the idea that he might be dreaming; fear of being insane never entered his mind. If he saw blue foliage with his own eyes, blue foliage there was, period.

There was a little flat space between the bottom of one cone and the next. Hoimon marched briskly along this, skirting mountain after mountain. Hobart, following, got his breath back after that run down the trail. He used it to demand to know, in slightly petulant tones, what was meant by all this nonsense about androsphinxes, Stumps of Sacrifice, and the rest.

Hoimon, the ascetic, dropped his folding bed beside a gnarly little tree with an unrealistic geometrical appearance; it reminded Hobart of somebody's attempt to build an imitation tree out of lengths of pipe. They would call it a functionalistic or surrealistic tree, he thought, but nobody had ever persuaded him that a thing that neither looked, felt, nor acted like a tree could be made a tree by calling it such.

Hoimon took a grip on the pseudotree and broke it off close to the ground. Then he snapped the

trunk across his knee to make a massive four-foot walking stick. He spoke: "We must hasten, O Rollin, leaving the full account for a more propitious time. Briefly, know that King Gordius of Logaia is bound by the curse to offer his first daughter to the androsphinx upon her coming of age. As his altitude has been kind to us ascetics, I undertook to find a champion who would rescue the maiden. You, O Rollin, are he." He set off briskly again, twirling his stick.

"Interesting, if true," groused Hobart. "But listen, mister. I never rescued a maiden from anything, unless you count the time my secretary got her head stuck in the wastebasket."

"So think you," replied Hoimon serenely. "My search carried me through several universes, and nowhere—" His voice died and ceased sharply in Hobart's ears as the engineer flattened himself against the side of one of the cones. Hoimon, continuing around the curve, was immediately out of sight. Hobart listened, then began to tiptoe off in the opposite direction.

"Ho!" came the ascetic's deep voice around the curve. Rollin Hobart began to run. A muscular hand from nowhere came down on his back with staggering force, and gripped coat, vest, shirt, and a considerable fold of skin. Hobart yelped as he was jerked off his feet and whisked around the bend by an arm that had stretched out to a length of at least thirty feet to grab him.

The arm contracted to its normal length, and Hobart found himself looking into the ascetic's melancholy eyes. Said Hoimon: "Little know you of Logaia, O Rollin, or you would not try to escape. If you remained in the mountains after sunset, the cave-folk— Lest you try such a stupid trick again, you shall precede me. March!"

Hobart walked slowly, scowling. He protested: "Maybe you think this is fun, but I've got a job to get back to!" Hoimon gave him a push that almost sent him headlong.

"Hasten," said the old man. "Now must I punish myself for using force on you?"

Hobart continued: "You're impeding the defense program! My firm has some important contracts—"

Another push. "The loss of the State of Unity is the gain— Ah!" The last exclamation announced their exit from the mountains—just like that. There were no foothills. The two men emerged from the last pair of conical peaks, and then the country was as flat in front of them as a skating rink, except for a cluster of hemispherical domes of black rock off to the left.

The black dome rose from a vast expanse of flat, pebbly ground, like an indefinitely enlarged gravel driveway, except that the gravel was a startling red. Hobart supposed that from this tract's lack of vegetation it should be called a desert, even though it did not look like any desert he had seen. It extended to a sharp, straight horizon, unbroken in front and to the left by any feature except the black hemispheres.

But to the right the landscape was something else. Thirty feet away began a fantastic jungle. Along a line as sharp as if it had been surveyed, the red gravel gave way to blue moss, and from the moss rose tall, regularly spaced trees, every one with an implausibly even tapering cylindrical trunk, apparently covered by black patent leather. The leaves were blue; some were circular, some elliptical, some other shapes, but all geometrically precise as though they had been cut out of blue paper to go into a store-window display.

In fact, reflected Hobart, this whole garish landscape looked as if it had been laid out with drawing instruments either by a gifted child or by a draftsman who had gone insane on the subject of functional design.

He had hardly begun to absorb his surroundings when his attention was attracted by something else, which riveted his eyesight precisely because it was not built from a blueprint. "It" was a girl tied to a section of glossy black tree trunk, sawn off at the top and planted in the gravel of the desert a few paces from the edge of the forest. As Hobart crunched unbidden over the pebbles toward the girl, he realized that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"That," came Hoimon's voice behind him, "is the Princess Argimanda."

II.

The first fact that Rollin Hobart noticed about the Princess Argimanda was that her hair was red. That was the first thing that anybody from the Earth, Solar System, Newton-Einstein universe, would have observed, for this was not a mere coppery-red or russet, but a real honest-to-gosh red like that of a stop light or a two-cent stamp.

It was also borne upon him as he approached that her skin was very pale, and the contrast between the white skin and the bright red of her cheeks gave her a heavily made-up look. When he got closer it appeared that the color was natural. She was tall, with delicate features, and wore a loose, white, knee-length garment of a very flimsy sheer material. She was tied to the stump by what appeared to be a few loops of ordinary package string.

Nor was she alone. A little way off a young man sat in a chair with an easel in front of him. This youth wore what looked at first sight like a suit of long, red underwear, which matched his hair.

The princess' blue eyes took in Rollin Hobart, and she cried in a strained voice: "Is this your champion, Hoimon?"

"Aye, O princess," rumbled the ascetic. "How far have the painful proceedings gone?"

The princess tossed her head toward the black rock domes. "The Court's taken to the hills," she said. Hobart, shading his eyes, made out a cluster of tiny figures atop the nearest dome. Some sort of banner rose from their midst. "And," continued Argimanda, "my dear brother has set up his sketching pad, so everything is ready. I sent Theiax into the forest that he might warn us, but he has not returned. I do hope the androsphinx has not eaten him."

"Might diminish his appetite for you, my girl," said a high male voice. It was the young man of the long underwear, which Hobart saw was really a skin-tight suit of red silk, with a jeweled belt and a little round, feathered cap. The resemblance between the youth and the princess was obvious. He was nervously tossing an octahedral pebble from hand to hand, and inquired: "This the champion, eh? Don't tell me I've set up my kit for nothing!"

Hoimon boomed: "I think your dignity might show more concern for the fate of your innocent sister!"

The young man shrugged. "Can't be helped, you know, so we might as well have an artistic record."

Hoimon growled, and finally articulated: "O Prince Alaxius, I present Rollin Ho—"

"Don't bother me with names, old thing," interrupted the artist, "especially as he'll probably be devoured shortly. Greetings, champion. Mustn't mind me; an aesthete puts his art first, you know. By the way, what *is* the color of that thing you're wearing? I've been making color notes; can't be expected to do a complete painting when the whole thing'll be over in a few minutes. I'm a hero if I know what to call your . . . ah . . . suit."

Hobart glanced down at his conservative business suit. "Brown," he responded. "But look here, what the devil's this all about? What am I—"

"Brown?" repeated Prince Alaxius wonderingly. "Never heard of it. That suit—I won't comment on its appalling lack of fit—it's something like yellow, yet it isn't. I tell you, sir, it's an *impossi-*

ble color! Either a thing's yellow or it isn't! I shall have to omit you from the picture; I haven't—"

Hobart raised his voice: "Damn it, listen! What's all this nonsense about the young lady's needing a rescue? Why can't she bust those little strings and walk off?"

"Because," said Alaxius, "then there wouldn't be any sacrifice, and the androsphinx would harry the kingdom instead. Hoimon, is this your idea of a champion? Stupidest ass—"

"Shut up!" howled Hobart. "Why can't one of you birds rescue her then?"

Hoimon tolled: "Neither of us has the means, O Rollin."

"Whaddya mean, means? I haven't got a gun or anything!"

"The androsphinx," explained Hoimon, "is to be defeated, not by guns or swords, but by wit and logical acumen."

"Yeah? I'd be willing to save your young lady if I knew how, if you'd promise to let me go home when it's over. But—"

Hobart stopped as something emerged from the forest. He jumped, and controlled an impulse to flee when he saw that the other two men showed no alarm. The newcomer was a huge, bright-yellow lion.

"Is . . . is this your androsphinx?" asked Hobart, beginning to sweat.

"No," said Hoimon, "this is one of our friends: the social lion. O Theiax, I present Rollin Hob—"

"He comes," said the lion, whereat Hobart jumped again. The lion's voice was a prolonged groan.

Prince Alaxius shrilled: "Oh dear, I must get to work! I wish you luck, dear sister."

"What kind?" asked the lion.

"Good or bad; I don't care." Alaxius trotted back to his easel and began sketching furiously.

"Some day," growled the lion, "that precious brother of yours will learn what being eaten feels like—"

"You promised, Theiax!" said the princess firmly.

Hobart cried: "What am I supposed to do?"

Hoimon explained: "The androsphinx will ask you a question; you shall try to answer it. It is simple."

"Yeah? Suppose I can't?"

"Then I regret to say, you will be eaten. So will the Princess Argimanda. That also is simple."

"Does that happen often?"

"It has always happened up to now. Ah, our enemy approaches!"

Around the corner of the forest where it abutted the conical mountains lumbered another beast. It was superficially much like a lion, but vastly larger, almost elephantine in bulk. Its face was human; four times life size, and a very low-browed, Neanderthaloid sort of human, but still anthropomorphous, with a yellow goat-beard wagging from a chin whose recession it failed to conceal. The creature was splay-footed and sway-backed, with scabby patches of disease on its wrinkled, yellow skin.

The princess watched its approach with her lips pressed together in a tight red line. The social lion crouched trembling a little way off with his tail between his legs. Prince Alaxius sketched harder than ever; Hoimon folded his arms across his bony chest and stood erect. Neither of these two men showed any fear of the brute, which presumably followed certain rules as to whom it should devour.

On came the androsphinx in dead silence except for the crunch of its paws on the gravel. When it was close enough for its stench to pucker Hobart's nose, it lowered its broad hindquarters heavily to the gravel.

It spoke in a hoarse, foggy whisper: "Do you serve me another champion?"

Rollin Hobart was not eager to identify himself as such, but Hoimon jerked a thumb: "This is he, O androsphinx!"

"Ah," drooled the monster. "Are you ready for the question, champion?"

Hobart tried to say "no," but his vocal organs refused to function.

"Then," said the androsphinx, "is it not true that no cat has nine tails?"

"I . . . uh . . . what?" said Hobart, taken off guard. His mind was so full of conflicting urges and inchoate schemes that he had missed all but the last few words.

The androsphinx repeated, and continued: "And is it also true, will you not stipulate, that no cat has eight tails, either?"

"I suppose so," muttered Hobart, wondering how far and fast the androsphinx could run.

"But it is also—"

"Hey!" Hobart broke in. "Haven't I answered a couple of questions already? Thought there was only one."

"Those were mere rhetoric," gasped the androsphinx. "Addressed to the atmosphere, as it were. You need not have answered yet. *The* question is yet to come. Now, it is also true that every cat has one tail more than no cat. Hence, if no cat has eight tails, every cat must have nine tails! Explain that, champion!"

"I . . . uh . . . you . . . if—"

"I shall count three," wheezed the androsphinx. "One—"

That "One!" brought Hobart's whirling mind into focus. It shouldn't be too—"

"*Two—*" The androsphinx rose to all fours.

Hobart threw up a hand. "Hold on! Got it!

You're using two different 'no's'!"

"What mean you? 'No' means 'no.' Thr—"

"The hell it does!" crackled Hobart. "When you said no cat had eight tails, you used 'no' in the sense of 'not any'; when you said a cat had one more tail than no cat, you used it in the sense of 'the absence of a.'"

"But—"

"Shut up! In the first sentence you made a statement about the class of cats; in the second you were talking about things of another class, incommensurable with the first: the absence of cats. The absence of a given cat may have any number of tails you like; for instance in place of the cat you might have a dog with one tail. So your last statement is simply not true in general."

"But," protested the androsphinx, "I meant not the absence of a cat; I meant a nonexistent cat—"

"Even worse! Not only is 'no' meaning 'not any' different from 'no' meaning 'nonexistent,' but real cats have real tails whereas unreal cats can have only unreal tails; hence an imaginary cat can't have *any* number of real tails, from zero up! So your statement that a real cat has one more tail than an imaginary one is inherently meaningless, since it uses both 'no' and 'tail' in two quite different and incommensurable senses—"

At this point the androsphinx interrupted with a mighty belch which made Hobart stagger and cough. Another followed, and another. The princess coughed also; Hobart reeled back out of range. Hoimon stood with folded arms and a martyred expression as long as he could; then the ascetic, too, beat a retreat. He cried: "Observe, O Rollin! Nois be praised!"

The androsphinx had sat down again; its head hung, drooling, with half-closed eyes as belch followed belch. Hobart jerked out his pocketknife and cut the princess' nominal bonds. When he looked at the monster again—it had shrunk! It was no bigger than a rhinoceros, and with each burp it lost further bulk.

When the princess, without warning, threw her arms around Rollin Hobart's neck and pressed her ruby lips to his, he was so busy watching the biological marvel that he practically ignored the girl's embrace; he held her limply and let her plaster his chin with kisses while he stared over her scarlet hair at the dwindling androsphinx.

The creature was now down to the size of a mere Alaskan grizzly. There was a flashing blur of yellow past Hobart's right as the social lion charged with a thunderous roar. The androsphinx reared wearily to meet the attack; the two great bodies slammed together, and then were rolling over and over and kicking showers of geometrical red pebbles in all directions. Hobart heard a ripping sound as Theiax's hind claw found the androsphinx's belly; then the monster shuddered and relaxed, the lion standing over it with his teeth fixed in its neck, shaking his foe's anthropoid head and growling through his nose.

The princess, meeting only the most tepid response from her champion, started to release him, but stopped at a cry of "Hold it, please!" from her brother. The gravel around Prince Alaxius was littered with sheets from his drawing board, and the young man in the tight costume was working frantically on another: evidently a sketch of hero embracing rescuee.

A large, sinewy hand fell on Hobart's shoulder. "O Rollin," intoned Hoimon, "you have won where every previous champion has failed. Go and claim your temporal reward: the hand of the princess, and the half of the Kingdom of Logaia!"

"Huh?" said Hobart. "But—I don't *want* the hand of the princess—excuse me, young lady; nothing personal—and I don't want half the kingdom, either!"

III.

Hoimon took his hand away with a puzzled frown. "How now? Is not the greatest reward that King Gordius can bestow enough for you?"

"Not that at all," persisted Hobart. "This infradimensional world of yours is very interesting, but I can't stay around to admire it. I want to get back to my work."

"Strange," mused Hoimon. "But I fear I cannot help you. I must return to the Conical Mountains to collect my bed of nails, after which I must punish myself for doing violence to the integrity of living creatures in bringing you here and causing the death of the androsphinx."

"Can't you even tell me how to get back?"

"Nay, that I cannot. Of all the ascetics of Logaia, I alone have achieved sufficient spiritual perfection to pass from universe to universe."

"Well—look here, I didn't ask to be brought; I've got every right to return. If you refuse to take me back you're doing more violence to my integrity; constructively, that is."

Hoimon frowned. "Now that you put it that way—"

"What is this?" groaned the lion, who had left off shaking the androsphinx's corpse and ambled over. "Who makes my mistress cry?" Hobart looked around, startled, to see the princess with her hands pressed to her face and her shoulders shaking.

"My love"—she got out—"wants . . . to go away!"

"Huh?" cried Hobart in new alarm. "I'm sorry, miss, but I'm not your love! I'm a confirmed bachelor! I—"

He stopped at a low rumble from Theiax: "You talk foolishness, champion. Rescuer *always* falls in love with princess and versy visa. You behave, or—"

"What?"

"Guess," said the lion, showing fangs.

Hoimon, the ascetic, slapped Hobart on the back. "That settles that, O Rollin," he said cheerfuly, "for I should be committing a greater constructive violence if I conducted you hence, thereby causing Theiax to eat you, than by leaving you here. Farewell!" He took a hitch in his towel, and off he strode twirling his stick.

Hobart watched him go with sagging shoulders. The lion sat down in front of him and cocked his head on one side. "What is the matter?" he grumbled. "Man does not look mournful when he marries girl who is clever, good, and beautiful! Look, I do trick!" Here the lion lay down and rolled over. Hobart could not help smiling. "Better," said Theiax. "Here comes his altitude." The lion lay down and began licking the scratches inflicted by the late androsphinx.

Hobart turned as a faint tooting and thumping came to his ears. Across the red gravel advanced a procession: undoubtedly the party that had lately occupied the top of the nearest black dome. In the lead puffed a stout, white-bearded man in a long robe and a crown. The party with him included a standard bearer in a glittering brass cuirass—the standard was a pole on which was a square of stiff black material with the word "RAIT" in white, block letters—several men in tight suits like that of Prince Alaxius, and some soldiers in kilts. Some of these last carried spears and circular shields, others antique-looking muskets.

Princess Argimanda had already started to run to her father; Prince Alaxius gathered up his art equipment and sauntered after, and the social lion padded after the prince. Hobart, feeling more ill at ease without his peculiar company than with them, followed.

The princess turned from the king as Hobart approached and cried: "Father, this is my peerless champion and future husband! His name is . . . uh—"

"Rollin something," said Prince Alaxius.

"Well, well," beamed the king. "Where's that eccentric Hoimon? Somebody must make a proper introduction, you know."

"He's gone," said the prince.

"Too bad," wagged the king. "Charion, you'll have to do it." He spoke to a tight-garbed, hatchet-faced man at his right; a bald, sinister-looking person with a large, black mustache, the ends of which turned up arrogantly.

Charion shrugged. "It's nonregulation, your altitude. Anyhow, I present the puissant prince, Rollin Something. Rolling Something, you stand before that high and mighty autocrat, Gordius the Affable, King of Logaia."

"R-r-r," muttered Theiax nearby. "You kneel."

"Huh? Me?" Hobart looked around.

"Yes, you," persisted the lion. "Court ekkytet."

Rollin Hobart's rugged independence did not take kindly to kneeling before anybody, but he went to one knee, lowering his face to conceal his scowl.

"Arise, Prince Rollin," said the king. "Welcome to the bosom of the Xerophi family!" He spread his pudgy arms.

Hobart glanced sidewise at the social lion. "What do I do now?" he hissed.

"Embrace his altitude!" the lion whispered back.

This, thought Hobart, was the damnedest thing yet. He allowed the king to subject him to the double hug used by Latin-Americans.

When Rollin disentangled himself from the king, he protested: "There must be some mistake, your altitude. I'm not a prince; just an ordinary practical engineer—"

The king waved him to silence. "You needn't be modest with me, my boy. A prince is a king-to-be; you're a king-to-be; therefore you're a prince, heh, heh."

"You mean half your kingdom?"

"Of course, of course; you can pick either half, too."

"But, your altitude, I don't know anything about running kingdoms—"

"You'll learn quickly enough. Anyway, my daughter can only marry a person of the rank of prince or better; hence you must by definition be of the rank of prince or better."

"That's another thing!" cried Hobart. "I don't know where the young lady got the idea I was her—"

"R-r-r-r," went Theiax. Hobart subsided. Come da revolution, you eat strawberries and like 'em, he reflected.

Charion was plucking at the king's sleeve. "Sire, is it not about enough amenities—"

"Eh? Yes, yes, I suppose so. Time to return, of course; the queen must be told and must meet her new son-in-law. You, Charion, take charge of Prince Rollin Something. Laus!"

He spoke to a thin, elderly man in a dark-blue robe and a conical hat. As the word was pronounced to rhyme with "house," Hobart half expected to see the oldster display resentment; but he learned eventually that "Laus" was a name, not an epithet. The kind continued: "Get out the wings of the wind!"

The old man shucked a bag off his back, loosened the drawstrings, and began to take out small umbrellas and hand them around. Hobart took one and looked at it in puzzlement. There was no cloud in the sky. Everybody was taking an umbrella except the lion Theiax. Prince Alaxius was standing close to the king and talking quickly in low tones; Hobart caught: "—a simply impossible fellow, I tell you; look at that suit he's wearing;

it's of a color that doesn't exist! And he argues all the time—"

"Later, later," muttered the king. "If he couldn't argue, he wouldn't have overcome the androsphinx."

The princess was bending over the lion, who had resumed licking his wounds. She asked: "Dear Theiax, can you return to Oroloia afoot all right?"

"Sure," grumbled the lion. "Mere scratches."

"Why did you not wait till the androsphinx had shrunk down smaller?"

"That is not sporting," said the lion.

"Silly males," said the princess, giving the beast a pat.

Since Charion had been detailed to take care of Hobart, Rollin Hobart attached himself to the sinister-looking courtier. He held out his umbrella and asked: "What's this thing?"

"The wings of the wind," replied Charion.

"I know; but what does it *do?*"

"We're traveling on the wings of the wind, your dignity. How do you expect us to do that without any wings of the wind to travel on?"

"Yes, but how does it work?"

"Oh. You grip the handle tight, and when the king opens his, you open yours and it takes you. We used to travel as the crow flies, but Laus' crow-wings were dangerous to use, so last year he invented this."

"Who's Laus."

Charion looked annoyed. "The Wizard of Wall Street, of course."

"Huh? Don't get it."

Charion concealed his exasperation with visible effort. "Laus is the royal wizard; Wall Street is a street running around the top of the city wall of Oroloia, on which is the royal wizard's official residence. Now do you understand?"

"Ready, everybody?" cried King Gordius. Everybody raised his umbrella.

"Go!" shouted the king, and snapped his wing of the wind open.

Hobart did likewise with his. At once a terrific wind smote him from behind and almost wrenched the umbrella out of his hand. His feet left the ground, and he was trailing through the atmosphere behind the device. It swooped this way and that. When he got a glimpse of the rest of the party, now quite a distance off, he observed that they were all sailing along serenely in a sort of formation. The trick apparently was to grip the handle in both fists just in front of one's solar plexus. Hobart did, and soon found that he could manage the contrivance easily.

He caught up with the convoy, his hair and clothes blown stiffly forward by the gale. A soldier—the commander, to judge by his plumed helmet and gold-plated mail shirt—shouted: "You could use some practice, couldn't you, young—I mean your dignity?" The princess threw him a tender smile that made him shudder. He thought of making a break for freedom, but the sight of the disciplined ease with which the soldiers managed their umbrellas with their left hands and their spears and muskets with their right dampened the idea.

They swept over the string-straight boundary at which the red desert and the blue jungle left off and yellow crop land began. A city came into view and expanded to a mass of prisms, spires, and domes, every last structure either black, white, red, yellow, or blue. The most remarkable feature was a tall screen or lattice arising from each of the four walls, which formed a square. The streets inside were laid out on a strict gridiron plan. In the center of the square was a cluster of extra-large buildings which Hobart took to be the local Kremlin.

The wind dropped as they approached the walls, and the wind-borne fliers dropped, too. They came to a running landing on a broad stretch of lawn that ran around the walls. Hobart almost pitched forward on his nose; the officer caught his arm.

"Thanks," said Hobart. "What's your name?"

"General Valangas," grinned the soldier. "Chancellor Charion should have introduced us; but he wouldn't, of course. Here he comes looking for his ward."

The man with the Wilhelm II mustache came up closing his umbrella. "You made the trip, I see," he said inanely, staring down his nose. Laus was collecting the umbrellas and putting them back in his bag.

Hobart asked: "Why didn't we land inside the walls?"

"Laus' work," answered Charion. "He doesn't allow the winds inside the walls, for fear they might bring in an army of barbarians. That lattice"—he pointed—"keeps out the west wind; the others keep out the east, south, and north winds."

"Are those the only winds you have here?"

"Obviously! A wind is either a north wind or it isn't!"

The bugler blew, and the drummer drummed, and the king and his company walked briskly up to the huge gate. There were more tootings from inside, and the gate creaked open. An explosion made Hobart start; as his eye caught a puff of thick, white smoke drifting from a gate tower there was another report, and so on. By the time the salute had ended they were under the archway.

An arm was slipped through his; it was the red-haired princess, gazing fondly up at him. "Dear Rollin," she murmured, "let us not start our life together with such cool formality!"

Hobart fumbled for an answer; life together my foot, he thought. He should have taken a firm

stand sooner; he should have made a break for freedom while they were flying on the wings of the wind; he certainly shouldn't have let them get him into this crowded city.

Not that Rollin Hobart was as completely hostile to the institution of marriage as he sometimes professed; he had considered favorably the possibility of waiting till he was forty and then marrying some squab half his age; with that advantage of years and experience he could bring the girl up in the way *he* thought she should go. A romantic marriage would be bad, and an insane union with an incredible female from a delirium world in which he did not fully believe would be out of the question.

But Hobart said nothing for the present, as he seldom hurt people's feelings—deliberately, that is. More practically, though Gordius might be called the affable monarch, he might use an ax on those who presumed on his affability too far.

Besides, to walk down the avenue arm-in-arm with an intoxicatingly beautiful woman was a self-justified act. The people lined the sidewalks and bowed and waved in most entertaining fashion. And the city itself was worth seeing. It reminded Hobart of a world's fair wherein the exhibits constituted the crowds. Besides the uncompromisingly brilliant colors of the geometrically severe buildings, the people presented an incredibly heterogeneous aspect. The clothes included robes, togas, shawls, gowns, saris, turbans, burnooses, and the hardly decently tight coveralls such as worn by Prince Alaxius and Chancellor Charion. A man in a spiked helmet and white cloak pulled his mount over to one side; the man's skin was black; not any mere Negroid chocolate-brown, but the black of India ink. The mount was a camellike beast, yellow with black rings all over, like a leopard.

"What are those?" asked Hobart, pointing.

"Those?" said the princess. "Oh, just Ikthepeli savages, in Oroloia to sell their fish." The savages were a family of tall, flat-faced, butter-yellow people with soup-bowl haircuts. Papa Ikthepeli came first with a spear and a bone through his negligible nose; then came Mamma Ikthepeli with a baby slung on her back, and then five children, diminuendo. All were quite naked. "Who is God?" added Argimanda.

"Huh?" Hobart frowned. "Let's see—the creator and ruler of the universe, or so most of us are taught in my world. Personally I'm willing to concede that He probably exists, but I doubt if He pays any attention to anything as insignificant as the human species."

"That sounds like our Nois," said Argimanda. "But Nois is not indifferent to the human inhabitants of this world—quite the reverse. Anybody can see him any time he wants."

"Is he a god or a man?" asked Hobart.

"Both," said the princess. "Here—we turn."

The procession filed into a narrow street, and almost immediately came to a shuffling halt. General Valangas shouted: "What's the matter up there?" and pushed forward to see.

Hobart pulled the princess along in the bulky soldier's wake, and presently saw over and between heads the cause of the delay. It was an immense tortoise, like those of the Galapagos, but three or four times as big; an unpleasantly distorted dwarf with a tomato-red skin sat in a chair bracketed to the reptile's back. The tortoise filled the street from side to side and proceeded down it at an unvarying testudinal plod. The dwarf was leaning over the back of his chair, waving his hands and apologizing.

Prince Alaxius was saying to the king: "Told you you should have widened this street before."

"Get along, get along!" shouted Charion. "Laus, *you* do something!"

"Ahem, all right, all right, rush me not," muttered the Wizard of Wall Street. "Where's my wand? My wand?"

"In your hand, you old pantaloon!" snarled Charion.

"My hand? Oh, yes, so it is!" Laus waved the wand, and recited:

"Beilavör gofarser
Norpötö wemoilou;
Zishirku zanthurer
Durherngar faboilou!"

The tortoise opened its beak, hissed, shimmered, and began to shrink. The dwarf scrambled down from his seat; just in time, as the shrinkage progressed rapidly and stopped when the tortoise was a mere foot long. The dwarf picked up his pet, crying: "Oh, my little Turquoise! What have they done to you?"

The king's procession crowded past; Hobart noticed that the wizard stayed with the dwarf. When they were all past, Hobart heard Laus' old voice reciting another incantation. It ended with a shriek of joy from the dwarf, by which Hobart judged that the reptile had regained its former size; he could not see from where he was.

They came out of the alley onto a vast plaza in which rose another walled inclosure. The domes and cones and prisms of the royal palace appeared over the wall. The gate was open, and another procession was coming out: a procession of women in black. Some of them held lyres which they mournfuly twanged.

"That, my love," said the Princess Argimanda, "is your future mother-in-law, Queen Vasalina!"

IV.

Rollin Hobart endured the second joyful family reunion and presentation with a fixed, slightly

ghastly smile. He had just observed that Queen Vasalina under her funereal garb was a comfortable-looking, middle-aged woman when Charion pulled at his sleeve.

"I'll show your dignity your apartments," said the chancellor. And in they went between a pair of black, cylindrical pylons the size of sequoia trunks and through an entrance big enough to admit a battleship. After the first three turns inside Hobart was quite lost; his attention was less on direction than on the architecture, which carried out the same style as the exterior. His memory clicked, and he remembered where he had seen structures of this kind before: made of a set of stone building blocks, of simple, elementary shapes, which he had received in a big, wooden box on his eighth birthday. Those blocks, too, had all been red, yellow, or blue.

"Apartments" turned out to be something of a euphemism. Chancellor Charion conducted him to a single room of modest size. As the chancellor held the door open for Hobart to enter, there was a sharp click, and something hit the engineer's shin an agonizing thump.

"*Yeow!*" shrieked Hobart, hopping on one leg. The missile rolled a little way along the floor; it was a steel ball the size of a marble. Inside the room, a crimson-haired boy crouched over a toy cannon.

"Your dignity!" snapped Charion; Hobart saw that the chancellor was addressing, not him, but the boy. "I thought you were to have vacated your room by now!"

"Don't want to vacate," squealed the boy, rising. Hobart's scalp prickled a little at the sight. There was something wrong about the boy: he was big enough for a thirteen-year-older, but he had the proportions, including the large head and smooth, characterless features, of a child of six. "This my room," he continued, stamping his foot.

"Now, now," said Charion, his voice full of obviously synthetic honey, "you don't want your new brother-in-law to sleep outdoors, do you?"

The boy's eyes widened, and he put his finger in his mouth: "That my new brother? What you mean? Got brother, Alaxius," he mumbled past the finger.

"I know, but Prince Rollin Something will marry your sister soon. Then he'll be your brother-in-law."

"Don't want such a funny-looking brother-in-law," said the boy. "Let him sleep outdoors; I don't care."

"Will you go," gritted the chancellor, "or must I call your father?"

The boy went, slowly, turning his head to stare at Hobart as he did so. Charion closed the door after him.

"Who's that?" asked Hobart.

"Didn't I introduce you? Prince Aites."

"Is he normal?"

"Normal? Why—what do you mean?"

"Well—how old is he?"

"He'll be thirteen day after tomorrow."

"He . . . uh . . . looks like such a child in a way."

"What do you expect? You f— I mean, of course, he's a child! Being normal, he'll become an adolescent when he's thirteen, and not a minute sooner."

"Where I come from," said Hobart, "you change from a child to an adolescent gradually."

Charion scowled. "I don't understand you—either he's a child or he isn't. But, then, I daresay you barbarians have peculiar customs."

"What do you mean, barbarian?" asked Hobart sharply.

"You have yellow hair, haven't you?" Charion dropped that subject and opened a chest full of clothes. "I suppose I should apologize for not having your room ready. In theory we always have a chamber prepared for the champion in case he defeats the androsphinx; but that has never happened hitherto, and the preparations have become lax in consequence. What color do you want?" The chancellor held up one of the skin-tight Logaian suits; red, others of yellow, blue, black, and white lay in the chest.

"What? Oh—I'll keep my own clothes, if you don't mind."

"Those things? My dear man, they're literally impossible: neither tight nor loose, and a color I can't even name! Would you prefer a robe?"

Hobart looked down at the cuffs of his shirt, the inside rims of which were showing the irregular dark stains that shirts acquire after a few hot hours of wear. But between a dirty shirt and a Logaian garment—

"I'll wear what I have on," he said firmly.

Charion shrugged. Hobart left the chancellor to his own devices while he washed up; he was agreeably surprised to find almost-modern plumbing. When he returned, Charion was seated in the best chair smoking a cigarette.

Hobart looked at this with more surprise. Evidently the chancellor thought Hobart's stare a hint, for he rasped: "Will you have one?"

Hobart had two cigars in his pocket, which he would have much preferred. But he'd better save those for times when he could relax and enjoy them properly. "Thanks, I will," he said.

The cigarette was vile. Hobart coughed, and asked: "What's the program?"

"Don't you know? There will be a grand state banquet to celebrate your betrothed's rescue and approaching nuptials. Tomorrow there will be a royal hunt, and the day after comes Prince Aites' birthday party."

"Hm-m-m." Hobart wanted to ask how to get

out of this predicament, but did not trust Charion that far. He inquired: "What's the condition of this kingdom I'm supposed to get half of?"

Charion opened his mouth halfway; it stuck silently for a few seconds before he said: "It is improving under my new policy."

"What policy's that?"

"Retrenchment."

"Good." The word had an encouraging sound to Hobart. "But I'd like some more information—area, population, funded debt, and so on?"

Charion stared coldly, muttered something about having to get ready for the banquet, and left.

A queer bird and far from ingratiating, thought Hobart, staring after him as he finished the cigarette. Maybe Logaia was a gift horse whose mouth deserved scrutiny.

Not that it would make any difference to Rollin Hobart's determination. This half-world was interesting enough; a fine place to spend a vacation, if Hobart had been in the mood for vacations. And if his firm had not been snowed under with work, and if Hoimon had come with a sensible, contractual business proposal—a job as public works overseer, for instance—and if— But if anybody thought they could kidnap him and high-pressure him into the silly fairy-tale king's-daughter-and-half-the-kingdom business—well, they didn't know their Rollin.

He was still masticating his plans when a gong boomed through the palace. Almost immediately Charion stuck his head in without knocking. "Dinner, your dignity," said the chancellor, who had changed from his black skin suit to a loose blue robe which struck Hobart as a sissy garment for a grown man.

The banquet hall was as big as a railroad terminal. People made way for them in most courtly fashion. As they approached the royal end of the table—or rather, the interminable meandering line of tables placed end to end and end to side—they passed a trough-shaped thing on one of the tables. It was too big for any reasonable platter, and had too low a freeboard for a coffin. Hobart asked what it was.

"That," said Charion with a wry smile, "is the dining trough of Valturus, the gunsmith. He has the table manners of a pig."

Prince Alaxius appeared before Hobart, with another exquisite in tow. "Look, Rhadas," exclaimed Alaxius, "didn't I tell you?"

Rhadas shook his head wonderingly. He reached out and fingered Hobart's dark-green necktie, whereat Hobart stiffened with ruffled dignity. Rhadas said: "'Tis true that in days of yore, certain philosophers proclaimed that in theory at least it was possible to have colors other than those we know. But since they could not produce examples of the same, their claims were held to be but the loose-tongued license of the learned."

"See?" said Alaxius. "Oh, before I forget, this is my brother-in-law to be, so they tell me, the mighty Prince Rollin. Actually, it was the social lion who finished off the androsphinx. This is my friend Rhadas, Rollin; mustn't mind him; he's an aesthete, too."

Hobart found a place card reading:

PRINS ROLIN SƎMOIN

which he supposed to be "Prince Rollin Something"—he was apparently going to be saddled with that spurious surname from now on—spelled in Logaian characters. Come to think of it, the Logaian alphabet seemed to be made of letters from the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic alphabets. And had he been speaking English all the while? Or had he just thought he was? If he had, how come English was the language of Logaia?

"Greetings, my love," said the princess' clear voice. She was going to sit beside him, naturally, he thought with some pleasure and more panic.

While he fumbled for a reply, a trumpet tooted, and the king and queen came through the door behind the royal chairs. Everybody bowed toward them; they sat; everybody sat.

One thing about the Logaians, reflected Hobart, was that when they ate they ate, with a minimum of chatter. The food startled him: instead of the ultra-fancy supersauced Byzantine concoctions he had braced himself for, he was given generous helpings of roast beef, baked potato, and peas, with a large sector of apple pie for dessert.

Another curious thing was the behavior of Valturus, the gunsmith. This fat, smirking individual, a few places away, waited until several helpings had been put in his trough. Then he climbed into the trough and wallowed.

Hobart murmured to Argimanda: "I see Charion didn't exaggerate when he said Valturus had pig's manners."

"Not that time," smiled the princess. "But beware of believing Charion when he answers any question of importance. Now that I observe our friend Valturus, I must say that he seems uncommonly cheerful for a man facing ruin."

"Who's going to ruin him?"

"We—the government, that is." She indicated the royal family, conspicuous by their red polls in the black-haired assemblage, and the ministers sitting in a row on the far side of the king.

"What for?"

"Oh, we are not doing it deliberately, but his business will not long survive the disbandment of the army."

"The disbandment—what's this?" frowned Hobart.

"Charion's idea; he says that expenditures must

be reduced, and that besides we should set a good example for other peoples."

"Is this such a peaceful world you can afford unilateral disarmament?"

"On the contrary, the barbarians—" At that moment Queen Vasalina, on the other side of the princess, touched the girl's arm. Hobart heard the queen's stage whisper: "Argimanda dear, your father wants to know whether your young man has his speech ready."

Speech! Hobart had not thought of that. He had no idea of what he was expected to say. To be more accurate, he supposed he was intended to give them some conventional guff, when he would have preferred to tell them to go plumb to hell—but that wouldn't do for obvious reasons.

King Gordius took a last gulp of wine and rose as the trumpets went off. Oh, Lord, thought Hobart; it would have to be something, and quick—

"—and so, ladies and gentlemen of Logaia, the puissant champion, the successful suitor, will tell you in his own words how he, an unknown barbarian, by unflagging resource and unremitting effort, gained that insight which enabled him to save our darling princess, and which has made him worthy and more than worthy to be enrolled in that line of heros, the Xerophi family, of which we are . . . ahem . . . a modest representative; wherefore, ladies and gentlemen, we give you, with high hopes and fatherly affection: PRINCE ROLLIN!"

The applause was tremendous. The king smiled all over and sat down. Hobart pulled himself angularly to his feet.

"I—" he began. A thunderous burst of applause stopped him.

"I—" Again the roar of handclapping.

"I—" He paused deliberately, but this time there was no applause. He glanced over at the king and saw why: Gordius had his finger to his lips. The affable monarch winked at Hobart. The engineer drew breath and began:

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of Logaia. Perhaps I should have warned somebody that I had used up most of my words on the androsphinx today. In any case I am more adept with a pencil and a slide rule than with my tongue, so I . . . uh . . . trust you won't take it amiss if I . . . uh—

"Concerning the means whereby I acquired the knowledge necessary to answer the monster's riddle, I can do no better than to refer you to the works of Ogden, Richards, Brouwer, Tarski, and other leaders of modern logic. I could, I suppose, give you an epitome of their doctrines, except for the facts that, first, it would take all night, and second, I haven't read any of their books myself. But if you wish to . . . uh—

"To conclude this mercifully brief address, I ask you, how did it happen? Again, how? Ah, ladies and gentlemen, that's the question! And what's the answer? I'll tell you; I admit—nay more, I assert, frankly and unequivocally, that, not being able to state with any reasonable degree of accuracy, and fearing lest I should deviate from those paths of rectitude and veracity in which it has been my unvarying custom to perambulate, I experience a certain natural hesitancy in giving oral expression to an opinion, the correctness of which might be interpreted somewhat erroneously! I thank you." Rollin Hobart sat down.

There was a short interval of silence, then a patter of applause, then a mighty surge of it. Hobart grinned a little; either they were glad of the brevity of the speech, or it was a case of "If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me, why what a very singularly deep young man this deep young man must be!"

There were no more speeches. A pair of public performers appeared; one a girl in a noticeable lack of filmy clothing, who plucked a lyre; her partner a man, gorgeous in plumed helmet, who went through calisthenic motions with his spear while he sang. The song was a slow repetitive thing with about as much tune as a set of church-bell changes.

Hobart was grateful when the banquet broke up. His gratitude at once gave place to apprehension when the princess caught his hand and towed him after the king and queen.

She led him through a maze of halls and rooms until they came to a moderate-sized one with subdued lighting and a large sofa. The king and queen were standing; Gordius laid a pudgy hand on Hobart's shoulder, saying: "I thought you'd like it better if I didn't order a full-dress state banquet, my boy. Some kingdoms do for their champions and wear the poor fellow out. When a man's fought a dragon all day, he's not apt to feel like reveling all night."

"Fine," said Hobart.

"You'll be up early for the behemoth hunt tomorrow, won't you?"

"Huh? I suppose so."

"Splendid! If there's anything you want, or any information—"

"Gordius!" interrupted Queen Vasalina. "Don't talk the poor boy to death. Can't you see they want to be alone?"

"Heh, heh, I guess you're right. So, good night, son. *You* know what to do." King Gordius poked Hobart's ribs with his thumb, grinning. Hobart despairingly watched the royal pair depart; they beamed back at him from the door, and his soul sickened.

Princess Argimanda leaned back against one end of the couch, with one leg doubled under her and one arm along the back. She was a dazzling crea-

ture, but Hobart repeated to himself: "I won't propose, I won't propose—"

"Rollin," she said at last, "will you not sit down?"

That seemed like a harmless request. He complied, then remembered that some girls were repelled by cigars. He got out one. "Mind?"

"Not at all, dear."

Hobart bit off the end and lit up. When it was going comfortably, he asked: "What's become of your friend the lion?"

"Oh, Theiax will be along sometime; I do not know when. He has no sense of time, which is why he always speaks in the present tense."

Silence. Then Argimanda said: "You made a remarkable speech, Rollin."

"Thanks. Didn't think it was much good, myself."

"I did not say it was good, dear."

"Oh. You mean remarkably bad?"

"No. It was remarkable in that I could not understand it." Hobart looked at her sharply, and she explained: "You see, my fairy godmother gave me intelligence as her foremost gift. Yet, as nearly as I could make out, the last paragraph was simply a complex way of saying 'I don't know.'"

"That's all it was," grinned Hobart. "What about this fairy godmother? Is that a metaphor?"

"A—what? Your language must differ from pure Logaian, which has no such word."

"Sure of that?"

"I should be; I edited the new standard dictionary," said the princess calmly.

"I meant," said Hobart, "do you really have fairy godmothers and all that?"

"Of course! The word exists, so the thing the word refers to must exist. I know mine well; her name is Kyzikeia, and she visits me every year on my birthday to see how I am doing."

"And if a fairy godmother gives you a quality, such as intelligence, you have to have that quality all your life?"

"But naturally! For example, Alaxius received the qualities of selfishness and superficiality along with his virtues, so selfish and superficial he must be. Poor Charion had the worst luck; he got neurosis, irritability, and mendacity."

"That what you meant when you warned me against believing him?"

"Yes. Not that he lies all the time; so much mendacity in one soul would be impractical. But in important matters you can generally count on him to lie."

"Then why does your father employ him?" asked Hobart.

"Because father has affability, and no matter what anybody says about Charion, Charion can always talk his way back into father's good graces."

Hobart mused: "When I tried to pump him—"

"Excuse me?"

"To get information out of him about the kingdom, he shut up like a clam."

Argimanda thought a while, and explained: "He has some plan afoot; I do not know what, but connected with his disarmament project, and I think he fears you and would like to frighten you away. The most logical way to do this would be to tell you that the kingdom is nearly bankrupt and is threatened by the barbarians. But this unfortunately is the truth, and Charion could never tell the truth in such a crucial matter. So his only remaining course was to say nothing."

Some reward for the champion, thought Hobart. He puffed silently.

Argimanda's voice came softly through the smoke: "Rollin, are we not going to discuss—dates and things?"

"Nope," said Hobart. "I don't want to be brutal, but I'm not going to ask you to marry me." He threw a glance at her widening blue eyes, then looked quickly away. "Sorry as hell if it hurts your feelings, but I've got my own plans, and they don't include a wife."

The blue eyes brimmed with tears, but she did not break down or sniffle. The tears rolled slowly and hesitantly, with a decent interval between each.

"Now, now," said Hobart, "it's not as bad as that. Look. I don't belong in this world. I've got my own world and my own life. Nobody's going to make a prince or king out of me. I don't even approve of monarchy as a form of government; think it's a lot of archaic nonsense."

She said very softly: "I am sure I could make you happy in any world."

"But—good heavens, I couldn't be in love with you: I've only known you a few hours!"

"I love you," she whispered.

"For Pete's sake why? How?"

"A princess *always* falls in love with her rescuer. When I knew you were he, I could not help it." She gave a sigh with a little catch in it. "But, strange man, if you do not want me, I could not force myself upon you, since I love you and would not do anything to make you unhappy. What is it that you wish?"

Hobart hesitated, then said: "Tell you one reason I couldn't marry you, Argimanda. You're beautiful, intelligent, kind, and so on; practically perfect. That's the trouble; you're too perfect; you'd give me an inferiority complex a yard wide."

"You need not labor the explanations, my love, that was to be. What do you want?"

"Well, mainly I want to get back to my own world. That means locating Hoimon and arranging an escape from Oroloia for me, and it would have to be fixed so Theiax wouldn't catch me at it."

"Why Theiax?"

"He practically promised to eat me if I tried it."

"Very well, my prince. I will do what I can."

"O. K.; I'll appreciate that. And better not say anything to the king about it. Tell him we're in no hurry, will you?"

"I will."

"Swell. I'll go, now. Good night."

"Farewell." The tears were coming faster. Hobart hurried out of the room and almost ran to his own quarters.

V.

At 6:00 a. m. by Hobart's watch, his bedroom door flew open; the business end of a trumpet was thrust into the room and began a maddening *tah-taa-teh tah-taa-teh tah-taa-teh.* The impact of the sound almost made Hobart bounce out of bed with shock. When his racing heart slowed and his vision cleared enough to become aware of surroundings, he shouted: "Stop that racket!"

The racket stopped and the trumpeter's face, red with blowing, appeared. "Your dignity—"

"Get out!" yelled Hobart, reaching for a shoe to throw.

"The hunt, your dignity!"

"Oh," yawned Hobart. "Excuse me."

A phalanx of servants trooped in with breakfast. He was rushed through the meal, shaved, and dressed before he knew it, though he tried fuzzily to do as much for himself as possible.

The hunting party congregated at the mammoth main entrance to the palace. Hobart was just as glad to see that the sinister chancellor was not among the gaudy crowd of Logaians, though the burly General Valangas was. The king slapped Hobart's back, gripped his arm, and hauled him about introducing him to counts and sirs and esquires whose names Hobart promptly forgot. A man on a horse trotted around from one side—Psambides, the Master of the Horse, the king explained—and after him came a swarm of grooms afoot towing horses. The king grinned fondly at his prospective son-in-law, and said: "I ordered Xenthops specially for you, son."

"Who, your altitude?"

"Call me dad. Xenthops is my fierce Barbarian stallion. It takes a real hero to ride him at all, heh, heh."

Hobart opened his mouth to protest that he was at best a mediocre rider, but as he did so he noted that all the Logaian gentlemen had swung into their saddles. There was one horse left, a large black creature with staring eyes. It would cause a lot of fuss to make a change now. Anyway, he'd be damned if he'd let a mere horse—

As he walked up to Xenthops, the horse bared a set of large white incisors and extended them tentatively toward him. Hobart reached out and cuffed the stallion's muzzle, saying: "Behave yourself!" Xenthops' eyes opened still wider as he jerked his head back and shifted his feet angrily. Hobart mounted without delay and took as firm a knee grip as his unhardened thigh muscles would allow. Xenthops fidgeted but did nothing otherwise untoward. Hobart reasoned that he could get away with it as long as he kept an attitude of confident superiority, but if he once showed hesitation or timidity, Xenthops would feel the difference, buck him off, and probably step on him.

The king's mount now appeared: a spotted camellike beast similar to the one Hobart had seen the day before in the streets of Oroloia. To Hobart's question, Sir Somebody explained: "The king's cameleopard." Hobart had always thought a cameleopard was a giraffe; everything was so remorselessly literal in this world.

And more servants appeared carrying lances and muskets, which they handed out to the huntsmen. Hobart, given his choice, took a gun and the powder horn and bullet bag that went with it.

They were all clattering out of the palace lot when a groaning made Hobart turn in his saddle to look back. Bringing up the tail of the procession was a wheeled, horse-drawn cannon manned by a squad of kilted soldiers commanded by General Valangas. Evidently the behemoth was no chipmunk.

Hobart would have liked to ask questions, but talking while trotting is not the easiest combination. Besides, he had to keep his eye peeled for chances to escape, and keep this fiery nag under both physical and psychological control.

After an hour's riding the agricultural checkerboard gave way with the usual abruptness to a rolling, roadless savannah. After another hour Psambides halted the crowd with upraised arm and began assigning them missions, as if this were a full-fledged military operation. Hobart found himself assigned to a squad of four who were to reconnoiter. The horses had to be kicked along a bit, as they wanted to crop the long swishing grass. Presently the troop halved. Hobart's companion, a lean young Logaian named Sphindex, informed him: "We're to scout along the bed of the Keio, and come back here to rendezvous in an hour."

"Is that a river?" asked Hobart innocently.

"Of course."

"What's a behemoth like?"

Sphindex stared. "Mean to say you've never hunted one?"

"Right."

"What have you hunted then?"

"Nothing, except a few targets."

"But . . . but my dear prince, how do you *exist?*"

"I manage." The subject of hunting did not seem promising. "Do you know an ascetic named Hoimon?"

Up went Sphindex's brows. "Me know an ascetic? Great Nois no! They don't hunt."

Hobart persisted: "Know anything about the cave-people?"

"Fellas who live in the Conical Mountains, that's all. Never seen one; Gordius won't let us hunt them. Though I don't know why; they're not

really human. Look, there's the Keio ahead."

He pointed with his lance toward a dark streak on the landscape. When they had topped a few more rises they overlooked the nearly dry bed of a small river, bordered by clumps of trees and brush.

Sphindex at once exhibited signs of excitement; he spurred his horse down the slope, and ducked through the screen of blue vegetation for a closer look at the stream bed. Hobart, following at a more cautious pace, met him dashing back. "Come on!" cried the hunting enthusiast.

Xenthops banked for a turn without a signal on Hobart's part and galloped after Sphindex's horse. Hobart called: "Find your behemoth?"

"No," Sphindex flung back, "but there's one drinking upstream."

"How do you know?"

"Don't be absurd; what other game can drink a river dry?"

Hobart saved his breath till they rejoined the main army, which at once set out at a gallop in a direction at a small angle to the one the scouts had taken. The cannon bounded thunderously in the rear behind its team, followed by the ammunition caisson.

"Your dignity!" It was the Master of the Horse, speaking to Hobart. "You're to join the troop covering the artillery."

"Yes, but what am I supposed to *do?*"

"Oh, stay with the king and do what he does." And off went Psambides to complete his arrangements.

The party deployed on a wide front, with the gun in the middle. They stopped on the last rise before reaching the Keio; somewhat farther upstream, Hobart judged. The gun and caisson were trotted up to the crest, and the teams unhitched and led back. Hobart got his first good look at the cannon. It had a cylindrical barrel with no taper; Logaia must still lack an Admiral Dahlgren. Instead of an elevation screw it had a crude arrangement with a shiftable crossbar like that of a Morris chair. The gunners were ramming in the powder, followed by the ball. Valangas himself filled the touchhole.

Hobart could not see anything through the trees bordering the river, though the sun flashed on the metal of huntsmen closing in from above and below on the section of stream in front of the cannon.

"Son!" called King Gordius from the back of his cameleopard, "over this way! You're in the line of fire!"

Hobart had no more than started to trot to the group of Logaians, sitting in their saddles with lances and muskets around the king, when his ear caught a sucking, burbling sound from the river. There were loud, plopping reports as of something huge being pulled out of the mud. A slate-black back appeared over the treetops.

A wave of retrograde motion ran through the huntsmen nearest to this portent. The trees whipped; one of them came down crashing, and the behemoth appeared.

Hobart's first reaction was: is *that* all? The behemoth combined an elephantine body, twice the dimensions of an elephant however, with a long thick tail and a head like that of a magnified hippopotamus. From its nose grew a pair of lateral horns. The beast, which might have been classed with the titanotheres, was big enough to be alarming but too plausible to be very interesting to Rollin Hobart *per se.*

The first members of the party to attract the behemoth's attention were a group of riders picking their way among the bushes on the hither side of the trees. It lumbered toward them. There was a sharp *pop-pop-pop* of muskets, and the riders whirled and galloped off to the right, upstream, leaving white puffs of smoke hanging in the still air behind them like clouds of ink from a group of retreating squids.

The behemoth crashed after them, apparently unhurt, exposing its right flank to the cannon as it did so. One of the riders fell off his horse, scrambled up, and disappeared into the vegetation. A yell from Valangas made Hobart swing his regard 180 degrees. "Ho!" roared the general, "you there, Something, get out of the way!" Hobart got, his horse bounding toward the group around the king; then, as the gunners hauled the trail still farther around, the king and his party streamed clockwise in a big circle around the gun to get out of the line of fire.

"Here it comes," said a voice. Hobart looked around to see the behemoth, head-on, trotting along the ridge on which the gun stood. It moved with deceptive speed, and was growing with panicking rapidity; it looked fifty feet tall though it was less than half that.

The cannon banged somewhere on Hobart's left, and the cloud of smoke leaped into the tail of his eye. He heard the smack of the ball hitting hide, and got a glimpse of a receding black dot against the sky: the shot, high, had glanced from the creature's back. The behemoth kept right on looming.

Then the muskets around Hobart went off, one or two and then all the rest with a crash. Hobart had not had a chance to examine his gun closely. Now he learned to his dismay that it was some sort of matchlock, and that the little tarred string that was led from a spool on the left side of the stock to the swiveled clamp that substituted for a hammer was not even lit. Then the black-powder smoke stung his eyes shut, and he felt Xenthops under him begin to move, first with little nervous steps, then faster. He heard the earth-shaking

thumps of the behemoth's tread just about the time he could see again.

His first glance picked up gunners afoot and hunters on horseback, all making tracks, and then King Gordius of Logaia, down near the river, rolling over and over in the yellow grass like one who has fallen from an express train in motion. The riderless cameleopard was doing crazy buck jumps; as Hobart watched, it disappeared into the trees. A back glance showed Hobart that the behemoth, too, was looking at the king; was in fact heading in that direction.

Hobart thought that if he could control Xenthops, he could get to his altitude first. Of course if that fat old fool wanted to provoke a fifty-ton animal into squashing him like a strawberry, it served him right, and it was certainly none of his, Hobart's, business—but he had already headed the horse toward the king, who had ceased his dizzy roll and was getting up. Gordius put up a hand as Hobart approached; the engineer braced himself and reached out to haul the king up behind him. It did not work that way: Gordius got a good grip on Hobart's wrist, heaved—and Hobart left the saddle and came down on top of the king.

The king yipped as the musket barrel got him over the ear; but with the behemoth towering over them they did not stop to feel for broken bones. They scrambled up and bolted into the timberlike frenetic rabbits. The monster crashed in after them. It blundered about for a bit, snapping tree trunks; then headed back for the deserted cannon.

Rollin Hobart and King Gordius, lying in a thicket, drew a pair of *whews*. The king said: "Can you see what he's doing, son?"

Hobart raised his head to peer. "He's trampling the gun." A wooden crackle confirmed this statement, as the gun carriage was flattened. "Good heavens, he's eating the barrel!"

"Strange," said the king; "I thought they ate nothing but grass. What now?"

"He seems to have some trouble swallowing it . . . it's down now." They heard a snort from the behemoth; it thumped off out of sight over the crest of the rise. There were a couple of distant musket shots and some thin shouts, and all was peaceful.

"We had better start looking for our mounts," said the king, getting up with a grunt. As he did so, something went *whtht*.

"What—" said the king. *Whuck!* An arrow stuck quivering in a tree trunk six inches from his altitude's nose.

Gordius turned to Hobart, mild blue eyes round. "Somebody," he said in an awed voice, "is shooting at me!"

"Duck!" cried Hobart. The king did so, just as a third arrow whistled through the leaves.

"How do you work this thing?" said Hobart in a stage whisper, indicating the musket. "Is it loaded?"

"It is unless you've fired it," replied the king. "Let's see—you have to light the match—this thing." Hobart did so with his cigarette lighter. "And the powder was all shaken out of the firing pan when you fell off Xenthops. You put more in, like this, and smooth it down with your thumb. Then you close the pan cover, so. Blow your match now and then so it doesn't go out. Ho, not so hard; you'll blow a spark into the pan."

Hobart extended the barrel cautiously toward the source point of the arrows, meantime moving his head to bring holes in the greenery—or rather bluery—into line. The gun weighed well over twenty pounds, but Hobart could manage it from his prone position. He whispered: "Got a sword or spear? I'm going to shoot and then go after the guy."

"I lost them when I fell off," said Gordius. "Use the musket butt."

The firearm had a front sight—a knob—but no rear sight. Hobart lined the barrel up as best he could. His eye caught a suggestion of motion, and he pulled the trigger.

The gun roared; smoke blotted out the foliage; the butt came back like a mule's kick; and Hobart's right thumb, which he had injudiciously wrapped around the stock, hit his nose an agonizing blow. Though his vision was as full of stars as of woods, he jumped up and bounded over the bushes after his shot, reversing the musket as he did so.

But there was no lurking assassin for him to club. He hunted for some minutes without result; then he saw something dark lying on the blue moss, and picked it up. It was a wig of short black hair.

King Gordius frowned when he saw the object. "I don't know who might wear it," he said. "Good Nois, what happened to your nose?"

Hobart explained, and added irritably: "If you want to hunt behemoths, your altitude, why go to all this bother, with horses and muskets and things? Why not take one of Laus' magic umbrellas, locate a victim from the air, and have your wizard conjure him down to vest-pocket size?"

"It's against the game laws to hunt with magic," explained the king. "As a just ruler, I couldn't violate my own laws, could I? Besides it doesn't work. Animals are sensitive to magic, and if you practice it in their neighborhood they'll run away before you can get within sight of them." As they set out afoot to try to rejoin the rest of the party, the affable monarch continued: "You know you saved my life, Rollin. I must do something to reward that. You already have my daughter and half my kingdom. How would a coronet do?"

"Fine," grumbled Hobart. At least such a bauble should have cash value back in New York.

VI.

A distracted Psambides picked them up after an hour's walk, and by late afternoon had rounded up the rest. General Valangas clucked when he heard the fate of the cannon. "Our latest model, too," he commented, but added with a grin: "It matters not; it would have been melted up in the course of disarmament anyway."

Hobart reflected that Valturus the gunsmith was not the only person to display a peculiar cheerfulness about a policy that threatened his livelihood. He remarked: "I should think a general like you would want to keep your army."

Valangas shrugged. "I would, but our chancellor convinced me that wars never settle anything, so why fight them? Besides, this new stuff, gunpowder, will probably put an end to war soon by making it so horrible that none will fight. What happened to your nose, lad?"

Hobart told him. The general guffawed, then asked: "Is it broken?"

"Don't think so," said Hobart, fingering the member tenderly. It had at least stopped bleeding.

"Good," roared Valangas, clapping Hobart on the back. "Then we'll see you in the tournament. I have promised myself to break a lance with you."

"What tournament?" snapped Hobart, feeling like a man caught in quicksand, whose every movement gets him involved more deeply.

"Why, tomorrow, at Prince Aites' party!"

"Not with my nose," said Hobart.

"What? But you just said it was not broken! We'll wear closed helmets, so a mere bump on the nose is no excuse."

"It is to me. I'm not going in any tournament."

"But, my good prince, surely you're no coward?"

"Not interested, that's all."

The king spoke up: "What's this about my future son-in-law's being a coward? After he saved my life—"

"Your altitude," said Valangas, "do you admit that a man is either a coward or he is not?"

Rollin Hobart spoke loudly: "I said I wasn't going to enter any tournament, and that's that. Make anything of it you like."

The kind looked unhappy; General Valangas sniffed contemptuously and began talking to someone else. Hobart asked a few questions about Hoimon, but all he gathered was that the gentlemen of the hunting party knew little and cared less about the activities of members of the brotherhood of ascetics.

They had to hurry to make the city of Oroloia before dark, for, as Hobart knew by now, there was no twilight; when the sun dropped below the horizon, darkness came down with a clank.

"The Onyx Room for cocktails in half an hour, my boy," King Gordius told him before leaving him in the palace. "We're eating privately tonight. Nois, I'm tired!"

Half the half an hour was spent by Hobart's new valet, Zorgon, in a rather futile attempt to sponge out of existence the two beautiful shiners that had appeared around the unwilling prince's eyes. When he entered the Onyx Room to find Princess Argimanda, and the social lion lapping a gallon of tea out of a bucket, the first words were a chorus from the princess and Theiax: "What—happened—to—your—nose?" The princess made a movement toward him, but he had his firm face on and she restrained herself.

Hobart told them the story of the hunt, and asked Theiax where he had been. The social lion looked sheepish, if one can imagine such a thing.

Argimanda spoke up: "There's a lioness in the Pyramidal Mountains, my l—Prince Rollin."

"Some day," rumbled Theiax, "you go hunting with me. You eat plenty of good meat. I kill lots of animals; don't eat any."

"Why not? You mean you kill just for the fun of it?" said Hobart.

"Sure. I am sport. Sport is one who kills for fun, men tell me; one who kills for practical reason is wicked poacher. You come with me; I show you. When you and Argimanda have cubs, you bring them, too."

The princess gave a small sigh, and Hobart was just as glad to see King Gordius come in before the conversation got any more speculative. Following the king came Prince Alaxius and a couple of men carrying two small cannon turned into holders for potted plants. "Put them—let's see—there and there!" said King Gordius. The men lowered the cannon, plants and all, to the floor. Gordius said: "At least it's fairly easy to dispose of those things. "You've no idea, Rollin, how awkward swords are to beat into plowshares; and as for making spears into pruning hooks, it works all right, but we'll have enough pruning hooks for ten kingdoms the size of ours. Ah, the drinks!" The butler poured and handed. The king said: "Here's to a long, happy, and fertile married life, my children!"

Hobart sipped to hide his expression, and sat down when the king did.

Boom! It went off right under Hobart, who jumped a foot straight up, spilling the rest of his drink.

The king started a little, too, as did the others. "Nois bless that boy!" he cried. "Wait till I get my hands on him!"

"Oh, father," said the princess, "he'll be an adolescent tomorrow!"

"I take it," said Hobart frigidly, "that you refer to my future brother-in-law, Prince Aites?"

"Yes, yes," said the king harassedly. "He *will*

put firecrackers around. It runs to quite a bill. But that'll be all right now, heh, because we'll transfer the gunpowder in the royal arsenal to our privy purse at a forced-sale price. We have to get rid of it, somehow, now that the army's being disbanded. Here, dear boy, have another drink!"

"Doesn't Argimanda take any?" asked Hobart, accepting.

"Why, no, she's *good*. Thought you knew. How's your appetite?"

"Could eat a horse and chase the driver," said Hobart.

The king looked a little taken aback; then he took the butler aside and whispered to him.

Prince Alaxius had just finished his second cocktail. He now stood up and stalked about, swinging his long legs, and said: "Rollin, I've spent all day mixing pigments to try to get those unearthly shades you wear. But the mixtures come out the same old red, yellow, and blue. Now how—hehehehehehehe!" At the end of this inane giggle, Prince Alaxius sank slowly to his knees on the rug, a wide foolish smile on his face, and collapsed to the floor.

Hobart jumped up and tried to raise Alaxius to his feet. "Dear, dear," said the king. "The fool's intoxicated again. Put him on something, Rollin; it'll wear off."

"Seemed perfectly sober a minute ago," said Hobart.

"Of course, of course; he wasn't intoxicated then, just about to be. Either one's intoxicated or one isn't."

Alaxius, stretched on the sofa, suddenly revived. He passed a hand across his face, grimaced, and said: "Did I make a fool of myself again? Sorry, father; I miscalculated."

Hobart, who happened to be bending over Alaxius, said in a low tone: "Could I see you later?" The aesthetic prince nodded briefly.

Hobart turned to King Gordius: "What's this about the privy purse and so on? I think I ought to know something about the way the finances of the kingdom are handled."

"Well," said the king, "let's see. Suppose Charion decided we need more revenue. He gets the royal treasurer to draw up a tax bill, and brings it to me for signature—"

"Excuse me," said Hobart, "but don't you have any sort of Parliament or Congress?"

"What? I don't know what you mean."

Hobart started to explain about these institutions. The king seemed intensely interested; pressed Hobart for more and more details, while Argimanda hung fascinated on his words and Alaxius oozed boredom. The lion had begun to snore. After they had sat down to dinner, the affable monarch continued to pump the engineer.

"Yes, yes," he said. "That's a most remarkable idea. I see I shall have to take it up with Charion.

Queen Vasalina put in a worried question: "Rollin dear, don't you like your steak?"

"What is it?" asked Hobart with a sickly smile. The meat was not only tough, but had a strange and not very agreeable flavor.

"Horse," said the king. "You just said you'd eat one. And, in case you still feel like chasing a driver after dinner, I've ordered one to wait outside. Of course if you catch him you mustn't really eat him, you know—"

"All right, my man," said Prince Alaxius, disposing himself on Hobart's bed with his hands clasped behind his head, "say your little say."

Hobart had begged off any extended visit with the king and queen or their daughter after dinner. He sat in his armchair and lit his remaining cigar, before answering: "I need a little advice, Alaxius."

"Ask away."

"How do you react to the last two day's events?"

Alaxius yawned. "If you expect me to say I'm pleased, I shall have to disappoint you."

"Not so disappointed at that. Meaning I'm not the brother-in-law you'd have picked?"

"It is not that, Rollin. While I don't know what Argimanda sees in you, I'd ordinarily not care whom she married. But it's this half-the-kingdom business."

"Ah," said Hobart, "now we're getting somewhere. Meaning you'd have gotten the whole thing if I hadn't rescued your sister?"

"Uh-huh."

"But what would have happened to Argimanda?"

"She'd have been eaten, stupid."

"Wouldn't that matter to you?" asked Hobart.

"Not particularly. My art comes first."

"Hardly an altruistic point of view."

Alaxius raised his eyebrows. "Of course I'm selfish! Didn't you know? My fairy godmother saw to that."

"Anyway, she seems to have given you veracity along with your other . . . uh . . . virtues."

"Candor. I can't help saying what I think, though it gets me into trouble constantly. Look here, this is all very dull. Wouldn't you rather come up to the studio and pose—"

Hobart put up a hand. "Easy, Alaxius. What would happen if I disappeared?"

"Why—that depends. If it happened before you married my sister, I'd be the sole heir again, I suppose. But if Argimanda were your widow, the succession would pass to her, and then to any male children—"

"O. K., O. K.; it's an immediate disappearance I'm interested in."

Alaxius looked puzzled. "I don't see what you're getting at. *I* am certainly not going to murder

you; haven't the necessary qualities. And it would be unprecedented for the champion to disappear voluntarily—"

"This champion," said Rollin Hobart grimly, "is about to establish a new precedent."

Alaxius' mouth dropped open, and he sat bolt upright on the bed. When the full implications of Hobart's statement sank in, the young prince's eyes rolled up, and he fell back on the pillow. He had fainted.

underwear would not give an impressive aesthetic effect. Speaking of aesthetics, he wondered momentarily whether Alaxius might have blabbed, despite the fact that it was to his selfish advantage not to. But a searching look at the prince's face disclosed an expression of no more than usual superciliousness.

A member of the group whom Hobart had not seen was a gangling red-haired youngster. At his

VII.

Next morning, the trumpeter awoke Hobart again with his cacaphonous racket. While Hobart was fumbling over the side of the bed for a shoe to answer this assault on his nerves, the fellow announced: "His altitude, King Gordius of Logaia; her luminescence, Queen Vasalina; his dignity, Prince Alaxius; her purity, Princess Argimanda—"

The whole Xerophi gang trooped in; Hobart pulled the covers up to his chin, thinking that his inquiring look, the queen said: "Don't you know Aites, Rollin dear?"

"Aites? But he didn't look at all like that when I saw him last!"

"Oh, but now he's an adolescent! I thought you knew. How is your poor, dear nose?"

"Better, thanks," said Hobart, feeling it. The swelling was less, but the goose-egg lump on the side of the king's head was still flourishing, his altitude wore the crown of Logaia cocked to one side as a consequence.

"Ahem," said the king; "my dear Rollin, as a small token of my . . . uh . . . appreciation for your heroic action yesterday, let me present you with a small . . . uh . . . token of my appreciation." He extended a package.

"I'm thrilled," said Hobart sadly, not wanting to hurt the old codger's feelings. The package contained the promised coronet; like the king's crown but with a simple, scalloped top border instead of the tall spikes with knobs on their ends. It fitted remarkably, and the Xerophi all went oh and ah and how well it becomes you.

He thanked them out. After breakfast he found the king with his feet up, a pipe in his mouth, and his crown askew, reading the Logaian *Ephemerides.* Gordius passed him the first section, which he had finished. It was printed in large, hand-set type on obviously hand-made paper; the language appeared to be the same phonetically spelled English that he had seen before in Logaia. He asked the king how this came to be. Gordius merely said: "The people of this country of yours are civilized, aren't they, son? Then they speak the language of civilized people, don't they? Well, we're civilized, so naturally we do, also. As for the spelling, I don't see how it could be otherwise; a letter either stands for a certain sound or it doesn't."

The gangler that Aites now was, entered with an armful of boxes, saying: "Father, where shall I put my toys and things?"

"Leave them here and I'll order Charion to distribute them to the poor children, Aites."

Hobart asked: "Giving away all your stuff?"

"Sure," said the boy. "They're child's things. And I'm sorry about the firecrackers, sir. It won't happen again."

"O. K.," said Hobart.

Something was bothering the boy; he fidgeted and produced a small pad. He said hesitantly: "Sir . . . would you mind . . . I'm starting a collection of the autographs of heros—"

Hobart signed promptly, whereat the boy said "Nolli!" in an awed tone. The rest of the day he stuck to Hobart like a bur, asking questions with respectful sirs on them, and in general displaying all the symptoms of hero worship.

The tournament took place in the huge concourse inside the palace walls. Hobart found it long and dull. Two regiments that were being disbanded, one of pikemen and one of musketeers, staged an elaborate parade. The pikemen charged in phalanx formation; the musketeers fired blank charges; as each rank fired, the men of the rear rank finished reloading and ran forward to the front, and fired in their turn. They solemnly turned over their standards to General Valanges, who made a speech during which some of them wept; they stacked their arms and filed into the stands to watch the rest of the show.

A fence was now set up along the central axis of the arena, and men with huge, round shields and bucket-shaped helmets that covered their whole heads rode horses in opposite directions along the opposite sides of the fence, trying to knock each other out of the saddle with padded poles like those used in canoe-tilting. Thanks to the fence, the heavy armor of the jousters, and the blue moss with which the floor of the arena was carpeted, the risk was negligible.

Rollin Hobart peacefully puffed a new pipe and waited for it to end; his expression did not even change when General Valangas, having won several of the tilts, rode by close enough to give him a scornful glance. He could afford to wait for the bee he had put in Prince Alaxius' bonnet to produce some honey. If the prince was selfish he was selfish, period. The people of this screwy world had the simple, monochromatic characters of the cast of an old-time melodrama. That was one more reason for not wanting to stay here—imagine being married to that girl on his left, with her magazine-cover beauty and her ultra-goodness that allowed not one human vice. But this inhuman consistency had the advantage of dependability. Alaxius would not fail him.

Nor did he. When Hobart excused himself and retired, he found the prince waiting for him with a pair of monkish robes with hoods, the sword and musket he had requested, and a map of Logaia.

Alaxius explained: "You take the Great West Road to here where it forks; this way goes to Barbaria and that way to the Conical Mountains, where we first met you. Are you sure you want to go there? The cave-people are not to be fooled with."

"Don't care if they're ten-foot cannibals," said Hobart. "I'll find Hoimon if I spend the rest of my life looking."

Alaxius shrugged. "No concern of mine. I'll accompany you to the fork, though."

"Nice of you."

"Not at all. I want to make sure you're on your way."

When Hobart started to pull the face-shading hood over his head, he was reminded of the coronet. He hesitated; if it was real gold it ought to fetch—but then he took the thing off and put it on the bed. He would not take advantage of old Gordius by accepting his gold under false pretenses.

In the dim hall they almost ran into the Princess Argimanda. Hobart started, expecting an alarm and the urgent need for explanation. But all she said was: "You are going, prince?" He nodded.

"May I . . . just once—"

No harm in that, he thought. She was in his arms as he was still opening them; kissed him

passionately; whispered: "Farewell, my dearest darling," and fled silently.

He was grateful for her having neither made a fuss nor tried to dissuade him; if only she weren't so *too* perfect. Wait, maybe it was just as well he was getting out; no telling what mere propinquity would do to the best of resolutions.

A sentry passed them without a word. Outside, an anonymous groom handed them horses, and a big food bag in the uncertain light of a pair of flambeaux bracketed to the palace wall. They *plop-plopped* through the deserted streets of Oroloia; the Logaians must keep early hours.

Out of the city, Alaxius led the way briskly, apparently steering by clairvoyance or by the faint stars overhead; the landscape as far as Hobart could see was as black as the inside of a cow. The uncertain feeling of jogging through a black void on an invisible steed oppressed Rollin Hobart, who had become accustomed to the definiteness of this orthogonal world.

Now that he observed them, even the stars were peculiar. They were all of the same magnitude, and were arranged in neat patterns: circles, squares, and configurations like diagrams of the molecules of organic compounds. In such a cosmos there was a real reason for naming constellations: that group on their right, for instance, was probably called the Tiller-Wheel; at least it looked like a tiller-wheel, whereas Taurus had never, to Hobart's exact mind, borne the slightest resemblance to a real bull.

He waited with some interest for more constellations to appear over the horizon. But after an hour's jogging none came, and it was gradually borne upon Hobart that none was coming: that the vault of heaven here stayed put relative to the earth. Maybe Hoimon had been right: the earth was the center of the Solar System here, and the universe was built on Ptolemaic lines. Come to think of it, between its black-and-white logic—which got plenty of support from the behavior of people and things—and its geocentric cosmogony, this whole plane of existence looked suspiciously as though it had sprung from the brains of a crew of Hellenistic philosophers. The correspondence was too close for coincidence; the question would bear looking into, if somebody cared to hire him under a decent contract to investigate—

"The folk," announced Alaxius. "You turn right; I return to Oroloia. It's up to you to decide whether you want to rest till dawn and then ride hard—for father will have sent men after you—or continue slowly now."

"Guess I'll wait," said Hobart. "It oughtn't—Hello, what's that?"

They fell silent as unmistakable hoof sounds came down the Great West Road, mixed with the creak of wheels.

"This is no time for honest travelers to be abroad," whispered Alaxius. "Could it be that father already pursues us?"

"Doesn't seem likely he'd do it in a wagon," replied Hobart. "Let's hide, anyway."

They dismounted as quietly as they could, which unfortunately was not very quiet, and pulled their horses off the road. The clink and shuffle of their movements must have carried to the approaching vehicle, for its sounds ceased. For some seconds all concerned froze, listening to their own breathing. From the direction of the unknown came a spark and then a sputter of light: a little yellow flame flickered and went out. But it left behind it a small, red spark. This moved about the darkness erratically, then came toward them. It would move a little, halt as though to listen, then move some more.

Hobart guessed it to be the match of a gun. He held his breath as it came right up to the fork, perhaps thirty feet from where he stood with his hand over his horse's muzzle.

The spark halted. Again came the flicker and the little yellow flame, near the spark but not identical with it. The light showed a taper in the hand of a man standing in front of the signpost, peering at it. In his free hand was the grandfather of horse pistols, and his nag's face was dimly visible behind him. He had an ordinary bearded Logaian face.

The stranger moved the taper back and forth in front of the sign, then stared into the darkness, little wrinkles of intentness around his eyes. He blew the taper out, and the red spark was moving back toward where the wagon should be, when Alaxius sneezed—uh, *kshyoo!*

The darkness flicked out in one brilliant flash and the pistol roared. Hobart heard the clatter of the man's scramble back into his seat, shouting to his animal, and horse and wagon rattled off down the road to Barbaria.

"Are you hit?" cried Hobart.

"Never came near me," came Alaxius' voice, "but that is a peculiar way to treat strangers in a peaceful country. I do not like being shot at, even by ear. I want to get back to my nice, safe palace."

They pulled their horses back on the road. Hobart stubbed his toe.

"Now what," he murmured, "can that be?" He bent down and fumbled. It was a musket like the one he carried under his arm.

"Did you drop a musket, Alaxius?" he asked.

"Not I. I hate the things."

"Somebody did. Let's have some light."

Alaxius, grumbling at the delay, lit his own taper. Another musket lay in the dust of the road twenty feet down the road the stranger had

taken. Beyond, on the rim of the dark, they could see another.

"Who," said Hobart, "would be running a wagonload of guns this way at this time of night?"

"I suppose Valturus," said Alaxius, "and to the Barbarians. He's not supposed to, but that is all I can think of."

"No wonder he looked so cheerful the other night! Does that mean trouble for Logaia?"

"It should. The Barbarians with guns and us with nothing—you can guess the rest."

Hobart thought. "I suppose you'll go back and warn your father?"

"Now that I think of it, I don't believe I will," said Alaxius. "If Logaia is to be conquered, I prefer to be somewhere else. I'll go to Psythoris, where my cousin rules—"

"But, then, who—"

"I don't know; it's no concern of mine. If you're interested, why do you not go?"

"I will," snapped Hobart, "and you're going with me!"

"But why—" bleated Alaxius.

"Corroboration. Think I want your old man to get the idea I murdered you and then cooked up a yarn to hide it? Come one!"

Alaxius looked startled, glanced about wildly, and suddenly blew out his taper. But, while he was still turning to run, Hobart pounced on him and caught his robe. They scuffled; Alaxius kicked Hobart in the shin, and Hobart cuffed the prince's face. Alaxius suddenly gave in, crying: "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!"

"Shut up," growled Hobart. He tied the trembling aesthete's hands behind his back, and heaved him aboard his horse. Then the engineer picked up his musket, mounted his own horse, and lit the match with his lighter. "Now," he said, "one break and you'll learn some more about being shot at by ear. March!"

Alaxius got under way, complaining: "I don't see why you must concern yourself in the fate of Logaia. But a few minutes ago you were trying to escape from it!"

"No good reason," agreed Hobart. "It's just that I'm not as consistent a heel as you are. Hm-m-m, guess we'd better have a story for Gordius, about how we suspected this gunrunner and followed him out of town."

"Why should I agree to your lies? Suppose I tell father about your real plans?"

"O. K., then I'll tell him how you helped me."

Alaxius got the point.

VIII.

Hobart was warned by Prince Alaxius that it would take more than the threat of a Barbarian invasion to divert the easygoing king from his after-breakfast pipe and paper. So the young men waited, Hobart impatiently and Alaxius in resignation, until the coast was clear. Then they descended on his altitude in the royal study.

At Hobart's somewhat elliptical account of the night's experience, the king said worriedly: "Dear, dear, mercy me! You are no doubt right about there being a plot. But who would want to plot against me? I've been the mildest of monarchs—"

"Looks like your gunsmith, Valturus, ought to be in on it," said Hobart.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. But who else? I'll call Charion at once—"

"I wouldn't, yet," said Hobart sharply.

"Why not, pray?"

"How do you know he's not in on it?"

"My chancellor? Absurd, my boy, absurd!"

"Not so sure. What's the financial history of his administration?"

"I don't see that it matters. But when he came in, five years ago, we had a surplus of forty-three thousand talents. Charion convinced me that the kingdom needed a big public-works program, to occupy the people and give us prestige abroad. His arguments were entirely logical, I assure you. Then, when the surplus was all spent and the kingdom in fact had acquired a large funded debt—a perfectly, normal, healthy condition, Charion explained to me—he said we should have to cut our rate of expenditure before it became too difficult to borrow more money. So Charion made it clear that if we disbanded the army, our neighbors would be so ingratiated by our noble example that they would do likewise, and war would be banished from the earth."

"How far has your disarmament program gone?"

"Those regiments you saw disbanded yesterday were the last; there remain only the palace sentries and the town watch. Dear, dear, son, I hope this action was not premature—"

Hobart rasped: "If I wanted to steal your kingdom, and knew I could persuade you to give up your army, I'd do just what Charion did. Then I'd have a gang of tough guys waiting over the border for me."

Gordius wagged his head. "I am all confused, Rollin. Charion's arguments still appear logical to me, but if things are as you say— Look, it could not be that Charion plans to lead Barbarians into Logaia; he has no quality of leadership. They would not follow him."

"Didn't say he was. Just said you want to be careful."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. I'll tell Valangas to make a search for evidence, and to begin reenlisting troops—"

"What makes you so sure of Valangas?"

"Oh, he is a soldier, my boy, and we can rely on his word."

"Seems to me he acted damned cheerful yesterday, just the way Valturus did."

"Oh, my Nois! You're a most suspicious young man, Rollin. But—very well, then, instead of Valangas I'll put the matter up to Laus—"

"Yeah? What makes you so sure—"

"Rollin!" cried the king, "you're being insufferable! I have to trust *somebody*. What logical reason can you give for suspecting Laus?"

"No logical reason; I was just suggesting that you don't trust anybody until you know better where you stand." He stood up. "Anyway, it's your baby, king. Handle it the way you think best. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? I don't understand!"

"You will." Hobart headed for the door. This time he was going to try the simplest method: to go to his room, get his baggage, and walk out the front door in plain daylight. They could make what they liked of it.

"Rollin, I demand an explanation! You cannot desert me at such a time for no reason at all!"

"O. K.," said Hobart. "I'm leaving because—"

He stopped in midsentence as Theiax strolled into the room. It would not do to state bluntly, as he had intended, that he simply would not let them make a prince and a king's son-in-law of him—not in front of the social lion, unless he wanted to commit suicide.

"Skip it," he said. "I'll stay. But if you want my advice you'd better take it. First off, better round up the royal family; they're all in the same boat, so you should be able to trust them. Then collect some really trustworthy palace guards and servants—"

A voice announced through the speaking tube: "Your altitude, his superiority the Chancellor of Logaia!"

"Send him away!" hissed Hobart.

"Send—" began the king. But then the door opened without a knock, and Charion stood in the entrance, with a long black cloak over his blue skin suit.

The king stammered: "I . . . uh . . . c-cannot see you now, Charion—"

The chancellor frowned. "Is your altitude ill?"

"No, but—"

"Then, in my official capacity, I have precedence over Prince Rollin," snapped the chancellor.

"But—"

"Either I am chancellor, and have precedence, or I am not and don't. Which shall it be?"

The king almost wept. "Please, good Charion, later—"

Charion glared at Hobart, who returned the look stonily. The chancellor turned on his heel and went out, slamming the door behind him.

"Now," said Hobart, "let's see a list of the people and weapons available in the palace. When we know where we stand—"

Thirty minutes later the Xerophi family had been assembled in the study, together with a few hastily collected weapons such as the king's ornamental, but still usable, swords of state, and a crossbow with which his altitude had once shot a singularly ferocious wild beast and which had been kept in a glass case ever since. A couple of trusted sentries had been posted in the hall leading to the study with instructions to let nobody by.

The king said: "Won't it be time for lunch soon, Rollin?"

"To hell with lunch. If Charion has half a brain, he'll be organizing a palace revolution right this minute. This has been coming up for some time; evidently my arrival forced their hand, as witness that attempt to murder you on the hunt—Hello, what's that?"

There were footsteps in the corridor, then voices, louder and louder. *Boom!*

Running steps approached; one of the sentries, Averoves, hurled himself into the study. "They shot Seivus when he stopped them!" he cried. Queen Vasalina began to weep. *Tramp, tramp,* and down the hall came a group of men, led by General Valangas with a smoking pistol in his hand. After him came Charion, the Wizard of Wall Street, and three tough-looking parties with swords.

"Come out quietly," roared the general, "or we'll come in and get you!"

There was a blur of movement past Hobart; Averoves, the sentry, had hurled his spear at Valangas. It struck the brass holder of the plume that towered up from his helmet, knocking the helmet off.

"There's your assassin," said Hobart. Under the helmet, Valangas' scalp was smoothly shaven.

The king cried: "A black wig—he must have worn it to hide the fact that he was a blond Barbarian—" He was cut off by a thunderous snarl from Theiax, who slunk into the doorway with his ears laid flat and crouched to spring.

Laus whipped a wand from his robe, pointed it at the lion, and began:

"Beilavör gofarser
Norpötö wemoilou—"

"Where—" breathed Hobart anxiously; then he spotted the crossbow in Prince Alaxius' nerveless fingers; snatched it and discharged it at the wizard. At the twang of the bow Laus screeched and tumbled backward, though Hobart could not see where the bolt had gone. He reached past Theiax and slammed the heavy door, bolted it, and with Averoves' help shoved a couch in front of it. A terrific thump told that the attack on the door had begun.

"Alaxius!" cried Hobart. "Take a sword—"

"I c-cannot . . . I'm afraid—"

"Then you barricade the other door before they

start coming in that way. A gun, a gun, my kingdom for a gun. Hey, what's that?" He pointed at one of the little cannon that had been turned into a plant holder. Without waiting for an answer he tore the plant out by the roots and dropped it; upended the gun and brought it down on the floor to shake the rest of the dirt out, ignoring a bleat of "My rug!" from the queen.

"Can I do something, sir?" queried Prince Aites, eyes full of worship.

"Maybe— Say, that pile of your old junk! Firecrackers?"

"Yes, sir—"

"That's luck! Get 'em out! break 'em open and pour the powder down this little darling!"

"I have some old iron shot, too—"

"Better and better!" They worked frantically; a double handful of iron balls followed the powder into the gun's maw. The door began to bulge and crack from the battering, and there were voices through the other door, too.

"What'll we mount it on?" mused Hobart. "Got any string?" The king produced a ball of twine from his desk; Hobart lashed the cannon to a chair.

"That string won't hold," said Averoves dubiously.

"Doesn't matter; we'll only fire it once. Look, everybody: Aites, take the crossbow. Argimanda, you and the queen haul the sofa away and open the door—not now, when I tell you to. I'll fire the gun; Aites, shoot the crossbow at the same time. Then the king and Averoves and I will go after them with our swords—you, too, Theiax. All set?"

He poured the rest of the powder into the touchhole, twisted up a morning paper, and lighted one end of it with his cigarette lighter. "Stand clear of the gun, everybody!"

The door opened just as the rebels swung back their improvised battering-ram for another blow. They stood uncertainly for two ticks of the clock; then Valangas started to stoop for his pistol. Hobart lowered his torch.

Wham! The room shook to the concussion; gun and chair flew backward and whanged against the far wall. Hobart and his party charged through the smoke. Hobart struck one, half blindly; his blade clanged against a brass breastplate; then they were out in the hall pounding after a couple of running figures. They got to the front entrance to see Valangas and two other men vault into saddles and gallop out, bending over their mounts' necks.

"Let 'em go," said Hobart; "there may be some more." They retraced their steps, passing the sentry Valangas had shot. Between this point and the study door lay three men: Charion and two of the tough strangers. Theiax crouched over one of the latter and crunched.

"Where's Laus?" asked Hobart. Just then a shriek came from the study. They clanked back to it, to find a trembling Alaxius and a fluttering, hysterical queen.

"The Wizard!" screamed Vasalina. "He took her! Through the window!" Theiax bounded to the embrasure and reared against it, foaming and filling the room with deafening roars.

When conversation was again possible, it was explained that Laus, in the form of a giant pig, had burst open the side door and scattered Alaxius' barricade; had resumed his proper shape and seized Argimanda; then his robe developed a pair of wings with which he flew out the window and away.

Queen Vasalina became incoherent at this point. King Gordius said: "Rollin, my son, you must lose no time: while Laus holds my daughter as a hostage, Valangas will be gathering the Barbarians!"

"Me?" said Hobart stupidly.

"Of course, it is you who will rescue her! I am too old, and Alaxius thinks of nothing but his own safety. When you have done so, I shall have to give you the other half of the kingdom. So you will be King of Logaia!"

"Good heavens," muttered Hobart through clenched teeth. He turned on the king. "Hadn't you better put off this king business for a while, sir? I haven't any experience—"

"Nonsense, my boy! After all you've done for us; saved my life twice so far—"

"That was just dumb luck—"

"Modesty, son, modesty; anyway, the deed transferring my rights to you is all made out, and Argimanda's husband must have a position commensurate—"

Hobart clenched his fists to keep from screaming "I don't want your daughter, or your kingdom, or anything to do with you! I'm an engineer and a bachelor, and all I want is to get back—" He would have defied the old boy, at that, but for the sight of Theiax moaning in the corner. If he once agreed to try to rescue Argimanda again, he'd go through with it, he knew. If he could stall off this horrible marriage long enough, maybe he'd find another chance to escape. But if they sewed him up on a life contract, he'd be really trapped: his confounded silly scruples would keep him from walking out on his bride, even with a good excuse. He might even get to *like* it, to pile horror on horror—

Theiax stood before him, head cocked anxiously. "We go now?" rumbled the lion. "I go with you. You save me from shrinking to pussy-cat size: I do anything you say." When Hobart withheld his answer, Theiax's tail swung gently right-left. It seemed likely that Theiax would follow the feline rather than the canine tradition as to the meaning of tailwag.

"All right," groaned Hobart.

With every step in his campaign, its futility seemed more and more patent to Rollin Hobart. He was supposed (a) to rescue Argimanda, and (b) either to enlist a force of Barbarian mercenaries to defend Logaia, or, failing that, to create dissension among the Barbarian tribes à la Colonel Lawrence, in order to gum up the invasion long enough to permit the threatened kingdom to rearm.

But he had said he would, damn it all, and he'd have to go through with it.

The first step, which the Logaians would have never, apparently, have thought of taking for all their pride in their logic, was to learn which way Laus had gone with his captive. A number of the citizens of Oroloia, it transpired, had seen the Wizard of Wall Street fly from the palace grounds. By plotting these observations on a map of the city, Hobart got a very good idea of the direction the kidnaper had taken. Comparison of the street map with one of all Logaia showed that the line of flight, prolonged, led straight to the country of the Parathai, one of the Barbarian tribes that was worrying King Gordius.

Of course, thought Hobart, gloomily hefting his sword while waiting for the grooms to bring his horse and other accessories, Laus might change his direction—circle or zigzag to throw possible pursuers off. But he would have to chance that. And it was not too unlikely that the Wizard would have flown in a beeline for his hide-out, if he had a hide-out. The people of this world were as utterly unsubtle as they very well could be.

He swished the sword about. Damn nonsense, he thought; give me a Tommy-gun any day. He didn't know a thing about swordplay and was not anxious to learn. But since the only firearms available were matchlocks that took minutes to reload, he might have to fall back on the fool snickersnee yet.

Finally, having endured the tearful embraces of the elder Xerophi, Rollin Hobart mounted his horse with a clank—Laus' wings of the wind had disappeared—and set out for Barbaria—probably, he reflected ruefully, the most unwilling knight-errant that this world of noble heros and dastardly villains had ever seen.

IX.

On the second day of Rollin Hobart's entry into Barbaria, he was winding among the cylindrical mesas that rose on all sides when Theiax growled.

Hobart pulled up. The lion stood with spread feet, yellow eyes fixed and tail twitching. "Men come," he muttered.

Well, that was all right: he would hoist the Logaian standard—a miniature of King Gordius' own, complete to the word "RAIT"—and they would understand that he was an ambassador and that his person was inviolate.

Hoofs drummed softly on the sand, and a troop of armed horsemen trotted around a mesa. At the sight of Hobart and his companion they broke into shrill, barking cries and a gallop. Hobart raised the standard: the men came on the faster. Wait a minute; *maybe* these guys knew about inviolate ambassadors and then again— An arrow whistled overhead, and another. Theiax snarled: "We run or fight, prince?"

The quick-thinking part of Hobart's mind labored to convince the rest of it that these men were out to kill him; that they could actually do it—kill *him,* a real person—as his fingers fumbled belatedly for his lighter. He dropped the standard, cocked his piece, lit and blew the match, and swung the barrel to cover the horsemen just before they arrived. Theiax gave a terrible roar that echoed among the mesas, and crouched.

At the last minute the charge split; the men as they pounded past leaned over the far sides of their horses to keep the animals' bodies between them and the musket. Hobart yelled: "Pick up the standard, Theiax!" The charge came to a skidding, dust-kicking halt; Hobart found himself surrounded by men who bent bows or pointed lances at him, or idly twirled swords. He twisted back and forth in the saddle, swinging the musket, but he obviously could not menace every point of the compass at once. If one of them actually took a swipe at him, he would have to fire, and the rest would cut him down in a fiftieth of the time necessary to reload. The only scant comfort was the thought that flight would probably not have worked, either.

"Envoy!" shouted Hobart. Then: "What's the matter, don't you understand Engl—Logaian?"

The men wore tall hats of black fleece, from under which brassy-yellow hair descended to their shoulders. Long, loose pants and soft-leather shoes completed their costume. Instead of answering him, they began to laugh, loudly and yet more loudly. They were looking at Theiax.

The social lion was sitting up on his haunches, holding the standard upright with his forepaws. He rolled a disgusted eye up at Hobart. "What is this, trick?" he inquired. "This is no time for tricks. I am made fool of."

Hobart reached down and took the standard. "Well?" he snapped. A couple of the men exchanged comments, but in a language Hobart did not understand. Theiax emitted a few low growls. Hobart faced away from the lion, swinging the musket slowly, the butt tucked under his right arm. He took time for a quick blow on the match.

One of the men spoke unintelligibly to him, and answered in the same tongue his statement that he was the ambassador of King Gordius and demanded to be taken to their big shot. After several repetitions and much pointing at the standard, the Barbarians seemed to get the idea. They mo-

tioned to Hobart and began to move off the way they had come, still surrounding him.

Khurav, the Sham of the Parathai, was a fine-looking man; a jeweled baldric slanted across his broad, bare chest and supported a prodigious sword. He was now putting a question in his own language to Hobart's escort. The engineer could not understand the replies, but he guessed that they ran something like: "O Sham, we found this stranger near the border of Logaia, and this tame lion with him. We would have slain him, but that the stranger claimed to be an ambassador—" Probably the escort did not add that Theiax's growls and his cocked musket had helped to dissuade them from their intention of carving him into little bits.

Khurav now addressed Hobart directly, in slow and carefully enunciated Logaian—or English: "Do—you—seek—audience—with—me?"

"Yes," said Hobart. "You're the Sham of the Parathai, aren't you?"

Khurav frowned. "Do—you—want—to deny—it?"

"Not at all; just asked." Hobart identified himself, whereat Khurav frowned some more.

"My men say," remarked the Barbarian, "when they found you, this tame lion was holding the standard. How do I know he is not the ambassador?"

Theiax looked bewildered; then he opened his mouth and gave a peculiar roar that started shrill and cascaded down the scale. He repeated this sound several times, and finally rolled over on his back, waving his paws. "I laugh!" he coughed. "I am ambassador! That is funny trick! I laugh some more!" Wherewith he repeated his sliding grunt.

"He means," said Hobart, "that he is not the ambassador."

"So I hear," said Khurav. "But I do not like to be laughed at. Am I being insulted?"

"No, no!" cried Hobart. This fellow was going to be difficult. He remembered King Gordius' last caution: "Watch out for Khurav, son; he's said to be a proud sort of Barbarian."

As if the Sham had not sufficiently displayed his pride already, he now bent a hostile glare on Hobart's musket. He said: "You threaten me with a lighted gun, Prince Rollin. Is it that you wish to challenge me to a duel?"

Hobart wearily pinched out the glowing end of the match. He apologized for the gun, for Theiax's behavior, and for having been born. He finally dampened down Khurav's suspicions to the point where the Sham invited him into his huge felt tent. Khurav paused inside the threshold and gestured expansively. "You are my guest, Prince Rollin. All this is yours. All that is mine is yours."

"You're much too kind," said Hobart, assuming that this was just a formula.

"No, I am not. We Parathai are hospitable. Therefore I am hospitable. Of course," he continued, "it is likewise true that all that is yours is also mine. For instance, I should like the gold chain on that strange-colored garment you wear."

Hobart, mastering his resentment, unsnapped his watch chain and handed it over. He managed to do it without exposing the actual watch, for fear that Khurav should take a fancy to that, too.

"Sit," said the chieftain, doing so, "and tell me why you come."

"Several reasons," said Hobart, wondering how to begin. "First: I'd like to extradite a fugitive from Logaian justice, one Laus, formerly the court wizard."

"Is he the one who flew over this country three days ago?"

"Guess he is. How about it?"

"He is not in my territory. He continued beyond the border; perhaps he landed in the country of the Marathai."

"Your neighbors?" queried Hobart, who had not yet gotten all the Barbarian tribes straight.

"Our immemorial enemies," corrected Khurav. "So I do not see how you can get your wizard."

Hobart mused: "I could visit the chief of the Marathai."

"No," said Khurav flatly.

"Why not?"

"They are our enemies. You are our friend. Therefore you are their enemy. It is obvious. If you were their friend, you would be our enemy and I should have to kill you."

Hobart sighed; no matter how carefully you handled the Sham, the conversation was apt to turn dangerous. Wait, there was a possibility—"Are you at war with the Marathai at present?"

"We are, but there is no fighting."

"How so?"

"They have guns. We warned them long ago that if they ever adopted such an unfair method of warfare, we would refuse to fight with them any longer. They have chosen to disregard our ultimatum."

"Haven't you any guns?"

"One or two, as curiosities. I am much too proud to make use of them."

Hobart began to feel excitement despite himself. He leaned forward and asked: "Any idea where they got these guns?"

"It is believed that they were sent from Logaia, though I do not know why King Gordius should be so stupid as to arm his enemies."

Hobart almost blurted that Gordius' stupidity had been of another order before he remembered that a diplomat should never give anything away without getting something much better in return.

He suggested: "Strong as Logaia is, there's no doubt that we'd welcome help from such tough fighters as the Parathai. If you'd like to help us against the Marathai, we could make it worth your while—"

But the Sham was leaning forward with a hostile glitter. "Pince Rollin, are you insulting me? Do you not know that I am much too proud to serve as a hired mercenary?"

"N-no . . . no offense, Sham—"

"Of course," said Khurav, relaxing a little, "if King Gordius chose to send me a gift, I should have to repay it; in services, if desired. Though how we could resume normal hostilities with such faithless ones as the—"

"Fine, fine," interrupted Hobart quickly. "Consider it settled; I'll take the matter up with Gordius first thing. By the way, have you heard anything of our runaway general, Valangas?"

"Do you mean the son of the Sham of the Marathai, Baramyash? He but recently returned to his ancestral home."

"Sounds like the same one."

"It could be; he would have Logaianized his name while among you. But come, it is dinner time." And Khurav rose abruptly and led the way to another compartment of the tent.

The first course consisted of lamb, roasted. It was served by a pair of husky, good-looking, blond wenches in beaded finery and things that jangled when they moved. Khurav, mouth full of mutton, waved at the girls. "My wives," he said, and took an enormous gulp of wine. "Which will you have?"

"Uh . . . *what?*"

"Which will you have? You did not think I lied when I said that all of mine was yours, did you? That would be an insult to my hospitality!"

"I . . . uh . . . could I decide later, please?"

"If you wish. You may have both, if you insist, but I pray you will leave me one, for I am fond of them."

The next course was lamb, boiled. Hobart had thought he was in a complex predicament when he had learned of the Xerophi family's plans for him. That was all *he* had known about complex predicaments! The fearfully perfect Argimanda would have been trial enough, but a she Barbarian —who, according to the rules of this world, would be one-hundred-percent barbarous— Let's see; he couldn't protest that he was already married, or about to be; Khurav evidently saw nothing out of the way about polygamy. If he refused the gift, the Sham would be offended and carve him. If he claimed he was—

The third course was lamb, fricasseed. Khurav talked ponderously of his people's herds, of the troubles of keeping the wolves from the sheep and the lions from the camels. Hobart foresaw the end of his capacity for lamb; he did not dare stop completely, so diddled with his food. He took a sip of Khurav's excellent wine for every gulp on the part of the Sham.

Khurav crammed the last pound of lamb into his mouth with both hands, and washed it down with a whole goblet. Then he leaned toward Hobart—they were sitting cross-legged on mats—and belched, horrendously.

Hobart, though not normally squeamish, flinched. Khurav looked pleased for the first time since Hobart had met him. "Thad was goode wan," he drawled. "You do bettair, preence!" He had suddenly acquired a thick accent, and Hobart was alarmed to see that his host had become quite drunk.

Hobart opened his mouth and stretched his esophagus, but no belch came.

"Cawm," reiterated the Sham. "Like thees!" The rugged face opened again, and out came another colossal burp.

Hobart tried again, with no more result.

Khurav frowned. "Id is rude, nod to belch. You do, queeck, now!"

Hobart tried desperately to conform to Barbarian etiquette. "I can't!" he cried finally.

Khurav's scowl became Stygian. His lips lifted in a snarl. "So! You insuld my hospitality! You want to fighd, yez? Cawm on!" The chieftain bounded to his feet—he was evidently one of those whose physical reflexes were not disorganized by intoxication. He snatched out his sword. "Ub!" he shouted. When Hobart hesitated, Khurav reached down and yanked him to his feet.

"Theiax!" yelled Hobart as he was marched out the entrance to the big tent.

Khurav jerked him around and stared at his face. "Thad lion, yez? Ho, ho!" He raised his voice to a bellow: *"Adshar! Fruz! Yezdeg!"*

"Thu, Sham! Thu, Sham!" answered the darkness, and men materialized into the torchlight. Khurav snarled a question at them; they answered; some ran off. There was a rattle of chains and a startled roar from a freshly awakened Theiax. The roars rose to frenzied volume and the chains clanked, but the Parathai must have trussed him well.

Khurav faced Hobart, who was still protesting innocence of wrong intent. The chief rasped: "You have no shield? Then I nod use, either. Draw!" He put his left arm behind him like a German *Säbel* fencer and stamped his feet. His eyes reflected little yellow torch flames.

"But—" screamed Hobart.

Swish! The huge blade clipped a lock of hair from Hobart's head. "Draw!" bawled Khurav, "or I keel you, anyway!"

Rollin Hobart drew. He would probably be dead in a matter of minutes, but one howling Barbarian would know he'd been in a fight!

There was little science on either side. Hobart sprang in with a full-armed slash. The blades clanged, and Hobart backed and parried the Sham's ferocious downright cut. The blow nearly disarmed the engineer, and twisted the blade in his hand. Then his eye fixed itself on a patch of bare skin: Khurav's sword hand, protected by no more than a crossbar on the hilt. Hobart swept his blade up and then down in a backhand slash; felt it smack—

Khurav's sword dropped to the sand, and the big man stared at his right hand. It had a weal across the back, but that was all, and Hobart realized in a flash that he had struck it with the flat. Time was wasting, though; the unwilling duelist brought his blade down hard flatwise on Khurav's skull, *thump!*

Khurav reeled under the blow and sat down. He looked up, blinking; tried thickly to speak. Then he dragged himself slowly up. When he was drawn painfully to his full height, he folded his arms, facing Rollin Hobart.

"Kill me," he said shortly.

"Why? I don't want to!"

"Kill me, I say. I am much too proud to live after you have humbled me."

"Aw, don't be silly, Khurav! That was just an accident; shouldn't have been any fight in the first place!"

"You will not? Very well." The Sham shrugged and turned to one of the circle of spectators. Words passed; the man took out a sword. Khurav knelt in front of him and bowed his head and pushed his hair forward from his thick neck.

Hobart stared in horrified fascination. The Parathaian spit on his hands, took a careful stance, and swung his sword up—and *down*—Hobart shut his eyes just before blade met neck; he could not, unfortunately, shut his ears. *Chug, thump!*

A strange sound rose from the circle of watchers, and grew: the sound of men sobbing. The tears were running down into the beards of the Barbarians as they reassembled the corpse of the late Khurav and reverently removed it.

And now, wondered Hobart, what would they do with—or to—him? Probably kill him, though for several minutes they had let him stand unmolested with sword in hand. Their attention was on the group carrying off the corpse. Maybe he could slip away in the darkness— Wait, he'd have to release Theiax first. Of course it had been Theiax's own idea to come, but still one couldn't walk out on—

He began to pick his way toward the direction from which the social lion's roars had come, and were still coming, muted to a continuous snarl. He had taken no more than ten steps among the tents when horny hands grabbed him from behind and hustled him back into the torchlight.

They were all around, shouting and waving lethal weapons. One of them stuck a whiskered face practically against Hobart's own, screaming: *"Fez barethvi ush lokh Sham! Ush Sham Parathen!"* All were howling *"Ush Sham Parathen!"* No doubt they were telling him what was to be done to him for causing the death of the Sham of the Parathai—"

A hawk-nosed oldster in a tall felt hat with ear flaps was trying to hush them. When this had been accomplished, he addressed Hobart in very broken Logaian: "They—say—you—new—Sham."

"I—what?"

"You new Sham; Sham of Parathai."

"But . . . but I don't *want* to be the new Sham! All I want—"

"Too bad you not like," said the old man complacently. "But too late. You beat Khurav; you Sham, anyway. Now we . . . uh . . . *yavzi*—you know—elevate you!"

Which they did with rough enthusiasm, hoisting Hobart to a sitting position on a shield carried on stalwart shoulders. For at least an hour they paraded around the camp, the men singing while the women screeched and waved torches and the children bawled. Hobart's protests and requests to let him unhitch Theiax went unheard and unheeded; the old man was the only Barbarian he had met besides Khurav with whom he could communicate, and the elder was lost in the torch-splashed shuffle.

He rematerialized when the shield bearers finally put Hobart down in front of his tent, saying: "You not go yet; Parathai must swear loyalty!"

The old boy took his place at the head of the line that was rapidly forming. He seized and wrung Hobart's hand vigorously and rattled off a sentence in Parathaian. He moved on, and the next man repeated the performance. And the next and the next. By the time he had shaken a hundred hands, Hobart's own hand began to ache. At two hundred it was swollen and red, and his feet were bothering him. At three hundred his eyes were glassy and he was swaying with fatigue. At five hundred—

He never knew how he stuck it out, with each handclasp shooting pains up to his elbow. At last, wonder of wonders, the end of the line drew near. Hobart touched the last man's hand briefly, snatching it away before a squeeze could be applied, and thanking God that the women didn't have to swear fealty, too.

He turned dead eyes on the oldster. "May I go now?" The man nodded; Hobart added: "What's your name?"

"Sanyesh, chief of hundred families."

"O. K., Sanyesh; I'll want to see you first thing in the morning." Hobart slouched into the tent—and his arms were seized from the two sides. Hobart gave one more convulsive start—assassins?—and there was feminine laughter and the jingle of ornaments.

Behind him came the reedy voice of Sanyesh: "These your wives, Sham. Thought you like know, yes?"

"But I don't *want*—"

"Too bad, but you beat Khurav, so they yours. Is all done. They nice girls, so you not disappoint them, no? Good night."

Rollin Hobart stuffed his handkerchief into his mouth to keep from screaming.

X.

Khurav's widows served Hobart breakfast when he awoke. They waited on him assiduously, but with reproachful looks that said as plainly as words: "In what way have we displeased you, lord?"

The breakfast comprised a mess of assorted organs and glands from one of the tribal sheep: probably, thought Hobart, the one whose meat he had eaten the night before. It was no doubt economical, and necessary to keep the Barbarians supplied with vitamins. But he'd be damned if anyone would make him like it.

The trouble with him was that he was too easy-going; too readily persuaded into accepting responsibilities, each of which merely led in this crazy world to more responsibilities, so that his goal of return to his own earth and work receded farther the more he pursued it. Well, what else could he have done? Every time he tried to take a firm stand, Theiax came along with his mouthful of teeth, or the Barbarians with their swords, and

bullied him into further commitments. Perhaps if he began by bumping off Theiax—but no, he couldn't do that; treachery was not one of his faults, and besides the social lion was an amusing and likable companion.

He'd have to go through with or evade his present commitments as best he could. The official positions that had been forced upon him should not be entirely disadvantageous; he might be able to use his prerogatives to locate Hoimon, the ascetic—

He shooed his "wives" out before dressing, a procedure that utterly mystified them, and went in search of Theiax. The lion was duly found and unchained, but, understandably, chose to be one-hundred-percent sulky. Even when Hobart had explained everything there was to explain, Theiax averted his eyes to the ground, grumbling: "I am treated badly. I am humilinated. I think you are my friend, but you let these ignorant ones tie me up like pig. I lose my dignity!"

"Aw, come on, Theiax," urged Hobart. "I was practically dead when they finished with me last night. And everything will be O. K. from now on. Look, would it make you happy if I did a trick for you? Stood on my head, for instance?"

Theiax's mouth twitched, and he burst into one of the high-low roars that served him as laughter. "You are funny, prince! All right, I be good." And the lion frisked down the path between the tents ahead of Hobart like a puppy.

Shortly after Hobart had returned to the Sham's tent, one of the widows announced: *"Zhizda Sanyesh veg,"* and sure enough it was the old chief of a hundred families.

Hobart set about, first, methodically questioning Sanyesh about the rights and duties of a Sham. He was slightly shocked at the extent to which the former outweighed the latter; perhaps if he stayed with the Parathai long enough he could teach them something about constitutional government—no, no, no, Rollin! Keep your eye on the ball! It probably wouldn't work with these illiterates, anyway—

It transpired that one of his first jobs would be to select a bodyguard of retainers from among the stalwarts of the nation, who would accompany him wherever he went. Why must they? Oh, explained Sanyesh haltingly, a Sham was *always* accompanied by retainers; that was one of the ways you knew he was a Sham. But Hobart's counsellor agreed that there was no immediate rush about selecting the guard.

"Well," said Hobart, "what would you say to an invasion of the country of the Marathai?" Not that he approved of invasions generally or soldiering by Rollin Hobart in particular, but it seemed the only course open to him.

Sanyesh raised his white eyebrows. "Guns?"

Hm-m-m, that was a poser. The Marathai had practically all of Logaia's firearms, and because of distances and poor communications it would take all eternity to collect an equal armament from the other civilized states such as Psythoris. The Parathai had only hand weapons; their prospective foes had these *and* guns *and* probably Laus' magic. Formidable as the Parathai looked, Hobart had heard them and the other Barbarians spoken of in Oroloia as "fickle." Assuming that the description applied with the usual literalness, that probably meant that the Barbarian warriors could be counted upon to make one reckless attack with fearsome whoops, and then to run away at the first check. Unless their leader were a second Jenghiz Khan, which Rollin Hobart emphatically was not.

But, if superiority in fire power were unobtainable, what about superiority in magic? He asked Sanyesh: "Are there any wizards in the tribe?"

"Was," shrugged the old man.

"What do you mean, was?"

"Was shaman and two assistant shamans."

"Where are they now?"

"Dead. They say, Khurav should fight Marathai hard, with guns and everything, or make peace. He think they insult him."

"Are there *any* good magicians in or near Parathaia?"

Sanyesh pondered. "Ikthepeli have medicine man. Not much good. Ikthepeli just dirty savages, not know anything."

"We'll pay him a visit, anyway."

The Ikthepeli lived quite a distance off, so Hobart decided it was too late in the day to set out. He spent the rest of the day trying to learn from Sanyesh the rudiments of the Parathaian language. Here he encountered a practical example of the fact that a good engineer is seldom a good linguist and vice versa. By the end of the day he had memorized perhaps a score of words, but had not gotten to first base on the formidable Parathai grammar, in which there seemed to be almost as many declensions as there were nouns and almost as many conjugations as there were verbs.

The widows, in an effort to propitiate their new lord and master, had prepared him an extra-special dinner: lamb, barbecued. Hobart hurried through the meal; afterward he gave Sanyesh, who would have liked to sit and drink and talk all night, a polite bum's rush. Then he hastened to the sleeping compartment of the tent, wanting to begin his slumber early enough not to mind getting up before dawn—only to find the widows planted before it, wreathed in anticipatory smiles that chilled his blood.

He jerked his thumb. "On your way, girls!"

The widows looked blank. The taller one, Khvarizud, said plaintively: *"Bizh er unzen math shaliv gvirsha?"*

"I don't understand you, so no use talking. I'm

going to sleep. One side, please."

"A, buzd unzen Sham yala?"

Hobart got enough of this sentence to infer that they were asking whether there was anything wrong with him. He reddened and shouted rudely: "Get out!" They understood the tone, and, scared and perplexed, got.

Sanyesh squinted at the bright sun that had just popped over the horizon, and remarked to Hobart: "Zhav send hot day."

The news did not cheer the engineer, for he reasoned that the day would be a hundred percent hot—practically incandescent. Fortunately he had left his coat and vest behind. His lips tightened into an even thinner line. Damn this world—or was there something wrong with him, a lack of adaptability that prevented his enjoying even five minutes of the time he had spent here, despite the fantastic honors that the natives insisted on heaping on him? Nonsense! He just knew what he wanted, that was all!

"Who," he asked casually, "is Zhav?" Conversing with Sanyesh was a strain because of the elder's dialect, but the other two Parathaians, Yezdeg and Fruz, who rode with them as a tentative bodyguard, did not speak any Logaian at all. Sunyesh had recommended them, and, after Hobart had agreed to take them, had casually added that they had been cronies of the late Khurav. Though they had so far shown no inclination to avenge the former Sham, their presence made Hobart uneasy, and he kept his musket ready in the crook of his arm.

Sanyesh replied: "Lord of everythings."

"A real person, or does he just live in the sky or something?"

"He real. Not live in sky. But lord of all; you, me, lion, weather, everythings."

"Sounds like that Nois the Logaians tell about."

"Same person, different name. Logaians ignorant; not use right name."

Theiax growled: "It is barbarians who are ig—"

Hobart turned quickly in the saddle and frowned the social lion to silence. He asked some more about Nois-Zhav, who appeared to hold a position in this world somewhere between the Japanese Emperor and the primitive Jewish Jehovah. Yes, he lived in a real place, in a wild country fifty-four miles beyond the boundaries of Marathaia. Yes, anybody could see him personally about such matters as drought and pestilence, though not many people did. When he was asked why more subjects did not take advantage of the accessibility of their god-emperor, Sanyesh shrugged vaguely and said he supposed that Zhav demanded a price for his favors.

They left the sandy mesa country and crossed a savannah like the one Hobart had hunted the behemoth in, except that this was as flat as a table top. Later the party stopped and rested for an hour while the horses cropped and Theiax, wrapping his tail around his nose, snored.

When the scorching sun had started down, they crossed another sharp boundary, whereat the savannah changed into a kind of desert. The footing was red sand, with great numbers of spherical black stones lying upon or embedded in it. This desert had some vegetation, in the form of cylindrical cactuslike plants at fifty-foot intervals in neat rows.

They had to walk the horses to minimize the risk of a stumble on the treacherous round stones. Hobart's heart leaped when Sanyesh pointed out to him the shimmer of water ahead; he was sure he had been about to expire from thirst—their water supply was low—and boredom.

"Sure it isn't a mirage?" he asked.

"What is mirage?"

"You know; you see water but it really isn't there."

Sanyesh raised his thin shoulders till they almost touched his ears in a mighty shrug. "No such thing in Parathaia," he said.

He was probably right at that, reflected Hobart; in this world things were always just what they seemed. Sanyesh told him that the body of water ahead was Lake Nithrid. It was a big lake; the far shore was out of sight, or so Hobart thought.

"Can see," said Sanyesh, when Hobart mentioned this. Naturally a Barbarian would have keen eyesight. The elder added: "If not, would be sea, not lake."

The cavalcade came to the top of a moderate slope leading down to the lake shore. All at once Hobart saw a lot of little yellow figures moving casually about by the marge. The vision must have been mutual, for as the horses started to pick their skidding way down the slope, the small figures suddenly speeded up their movements like a nest of disturbed ants. Tinny little cries came to Hobart's ears.

The Barbarian named Fruz pointed and bellowed something. "He say," translated Sanyesh, "must hurry; Ikthepeli run away."

The horses were encouraged as much as was safe considering the incline. But long before the patry reached the bottom, the yellow savages had launched a lot of dugout canoes and were paddling swiftly out over the smiling surface of Lake Nithrid. Fruz and Yezdeg shouted epithets after them as they disappeared into the golden river of reflection painted on the lake by the setting sun.

"Don't seem to trust us, do they?" commented Hobart.

Sanyesh spat his contempt. "Useless ones; no good except to hunt for sport."

If the Barbarians were in the habit of killing Ikthepeli for the fun of it, Hobart could see why

their reception was not as cordial as it might have been. Holding fast to his determination not to let himself be sidetracked by considerations of moral reform, he asked wearily: "What'll we do now?"

"Find place to sleep," said the hawk-nosed elder. "Sun out soon. Fish-eaters come back."

"When?"

"Tomorrow maybe, maybe not. Nobody know." A shrug implied the unimportance of time.

At the base of the slope were a number of gaping holes; entrances to the caves in which the savages evidently dwelt. The unenthusiastic Sham investigated a couple. They smelled strongly of their recent tenants, and contained a scattering of crude weapons and implements: wooden spears, fish-bone combs, and the like.

"Look, Sham," said Sanyesh. He indicated another cave across whose entrance a leather curtain was hung. When this was pushed aside, the party gave a simultaneous gasp of delight at the coolth that flowed gently out. At right angles to the curtain, a small groove or trench ran from the floor of the cave and out to lose itself in the sands. A small trickle of water flowed out through this ditch.

"Good for sleep, Sham," said Sanyesh; as he spoke the light dimmed and expired almost as though it had been turned off by a switch. The sun had set, and as it was immediately too dark for more exploration, the elder's suggestion seemed the only practical one.

When Theiax volunteered to stand watch, Fruz and Yezdeg looked at the lion for the first time in truly friendly fashion. The human wing of the party made themselves as comfortable as they could in the cool cave and dropped off to sleep as though stunned.

XI.

Light and sound awakened Rollin Hobart; the former from the cave mouth, where the curtain was thrust aside by Theiax's head, the latter the lion's deep voice: "Yellow men come back, prince! Wake up!"

The Parathai yawned and stretched themselves out of their respective dreamlands.

"What are they doing?" asked Hobart, feeling his teeth with his tongue and wishing for a toothbrush.

The social lion looked back over his shoulder. "Many little boats come. One yellow man gets out, wades, comes on shore. You want I kill him?"

"No, no! I want to see him." Hobart stood up and thrust the curtain entirely to one side. The Ikthepeli canoes were lined up a few yards off shore, packed with yellow humanity with no signs of hostile intent. Across the beach advanced one of the savages: a squat, middle-aged individual with a face like a disk of wrinkled butter and lank black hair. He wore the skull of a small animal around his neck, and a bone skewer through his nose, but was otherwise unclad.

When he saw the group in the cave mouth he said something in a high, whining voice and dropped to all fours. He crawled thus toward them with every evidence of the most abject humility.

Yezdeg spat and jerked his thumb toward Hobart, snarling: *"Myavam Sham Parathen ir; zamath varaliv Logayag vorara math o gvari!"*

The crawling man raised his head toward Hobart with a slightly less hopeless expression, saying: "You wish to speak with me in Logaian?" He handled the language quite fairly himself.

"Uh-huh," said Hobart. "Stand up, man; I'm not going to hurt you!"

"I plead for my poor people, who never hurt Parathai—" began the savage, getting up.

"O. K., O. K., tell 'em to come ashore. If they don't bother us, we won't bother them."

The savage turned and shrilled a command to the people in the boats. Gingerly the canoes were brought up to the land, and timidly the occupants, all ages and sizes, climbed out, each one trying to hide himself behind the others. They were a scrawny lot; from the fact that the one who spoke Logaian looked much the best fed, Hobart guessed that he was the boss.

He said: "We're looking for the medicine man of the Ikthepeli."

"Why do you want him?"

"Business; I think he can help us."

"I am him. I am called Kai."

"Fine! How—"

"Mizam Zhav!" cried Fruz. He was staring toward the rear of the cave; the other followed his eyes. By the light that now came through the entrance appeared a sight that made Hobart's scalp prickle: great cakes of ice, on each of which reposed a corpse. The light was strong enough to show bright-red skin.

"What are those?" asked Hobart. "Keeping 'em to bury, or what?"

"No," said Kai indifferently. "To eat."

"Huh?"

"Sure. They are Rumatzi we killed in this year's battle."

"You mean you . . . uh—"

"You did not know? Every winter we cut ice from the lake. In spring we arrange battle with Rumatzi, who live across the lake. Same number on both sides, same weapons, same everything. We take their deads and they take ours, to eat. Good idea, yes?"

"Not according to my way of thinking," said Hobart.

"But what else to do? Too many people otherwise; not enough fish; we starve; Rumatzi starve. Must kill some, so why not have fun of a battle?"

"Maybe I'm prejudiced, but it still seems a pretty gruesome way of disposing of the casualties."

Kai spread his hands. "You mean fight like horse-people and *not* eat the deads? We think that is bad, wicked business, to kill people for no good reason!"

"O. K., you can eat your own grandmothers as far as I'm concerned. Now how—"

Kai's mouth and eyes widened with horror. "You mean eat one of our own tribe? Why, that would be *cannibal!* That is eating *people!* We eat Rumatzi; they eat us; we are always careful not to mix deads up! You horse-people have such bad, wicked ideas!"

"O. K., skip it! We need the help of a competent magician against our enemies, the Marathai—"

"Not me!" interjected Kai. "Not my war! My poor people have enough trouble with Parathai, without getting Marathai down on us, too! Anyway I am not a good magician. I am just a poor hungry Ikthepel, who knows a couple little tricks to protect me and my poor people!"

"What sort of trouble have you had with my outfit?"

"You will not punish my poor people if I tell?" said Kai, looking uneasily at Hobart's companions.

"Of course not!"

"All right. You could not catch me anyway; I would just disappear, *fush-whoosh,* but my Ikthepeli can not do that. You ask for trouble. What you call trouble? Is it trouble when your horsemens come by on horses and chop up our canoes to make a fire?"

"Yes, I'd say it was," said Hobart judiciously.

"Is it trouble when they take away our only net, that took a year to make, so we have to spear fish until we make another?"

"Undoubtedly."

Kai stood upright now, his former hangdog air gone as his anger rose. "How then, you call it trouble when they rape our women, right here on beach, in front of whole tribe? Trouble when they kill women's men when they try to stop them? Three men killed . . . let me count . . . fifteen days ago. Rest not killed because they ran fast. One killed four days ago; we found him dead with Parathai arrow. One of your horse-people thought it funny to shoot. What do say now, Sham?"

Hobart was by this time almost as indignant as the medicine man. He snapped: "I'll soon put a stop to that. But wait—how about your help?"

Kai looked crafty, but so openly and transparently so that the effect was more amusing than sinister. He said at last: "If you will really stop Parathai from hurting us, I will help. But can you? They are proud people."

"I'll do my best. If they commit anything on you, I'll punish them as though it were on a member of their own nation. But what's your help going to consist of? Are you really a poor magician, or was that just a gag?"

"I am not very good, but I will do my best, too. Maybe I know more than just a couple tricks."

"Such as?"

"Oh, I will not tell that. Secret of trade, yes, ha-ha?"

"Ha-ha yourself," smiled Hobart. "You'd better show me at least a sample."

"I can do." Kai turned to the clear sky and extended his hands, palms up. He began an ululating wail:

"Marekula eromanga,
Savaii upolu!
Maalaea topanga
Nukunana kandavu,
Pago pago oamaru!"

A few hundred feet up, a small cloud formed; at first like one of those that mark an ordinary thermal; then boiling more and more furiously, like a miniature thunderhead. Kai's voice rose to a shriek, and he clapped his hands. At once a narrow shaft of rain poured down from the cloudlet; it was no trouble to watch the dark streamer extend earthward. It took it two or three minutes to reach the surface of the lake, where it churned the smooth surface in a fifty-foot circle tangent to the shore line.

Kai clapped his hands twice, and the rain was sharply cut off at the source. By the time the drops that had already started down from the cloud had all struck the lake, the cloud itself had evaporated. Kai turned to Hobart with a grin: "I have a couple tricks, yes?"

"Evidently. Want to get your stuff ready to come with us?"

"Me come with you? No, sir! Not me! I fear Parathai, and my poor people need me. Look!" He took off his necklace with its little rodent skull, and hung it around the engineer's neck. "When you want me, take told of the skull and squeeze—not hard, or it breaks—and call me. I come, *foosh!* But three times only; will not work after that."

"Well—" said Hobart doubtfully.

"Do not worry; I come! I must protect my people." Kai stiffened, a far-away look coming into his eyes. He pulled several slivers of bone out of his topknot, tossed them into the air, and studied the positions in which they fell to the ground.

"Ha!" he cried tensely. "Now, Sham, you can show me if you mean what you say. I gave you a sample magic; you give me a sample justice. One of your Parathai has just killed one of my poor people!"

"What?" Hobart looked wildly around; Yezdeg was plainly missing.

"Yes. He took the wife of Aao. We think it is

a bad, wicked thing to take another man's wife. The last time it happened, in my father's days, we gave the bad man to Rumatzi to eat. But that is not all: the wife of Aao fought your horseman, and he got angry and killed her. Now, will you kill your horseman?"

"Whew!" whistled Hobart. As usual, just when he had been about to draw a breath of relief, it transpired that his apparent piece of astounding good luck had a catch in it. In this case the worm had contained an exceptionally vicious hook: he was committed to having one of his new subjects executed. To Rollin Hobart, it was a very serious matter to kill a man.

He turned to Sanyesh: "Will you—" But he stopped at the elder's stony expression. He could trust nobody but himself to find Yezdeg, investigate the alleged murder, and deal impartial justice.

He picked up his musket, said "Come on!" and strode out to where Theiax guarded the horses, to the uneasy displeasure of the latter. There were only three horses, a fact that blasted Hobart's lingering hope that he might find Yezdeg innocently snoozing in the neighborhood. The Ikthepeli gave all the party a wide berth, hovering ready for a dash to their canoes, except for Kai, who followed sticking the skewers back in his hair.

"Better come along to see how this turns out," Hobart told him.

But Kai shook his head stubbornly, and Hobart, intercepting the glares that Sanyesh and Fruz focused on the medicine man, could not blame him. Kai explained: "My bones will tell me, Sham!"

Hobart mounted and led the way to the top of the slope. The flat, cactus-studded desert spread out before them, and Hobart immediately saw in the distance a horseman ambling peacefully toward them on a yellow horse. It was Yezdeg, without a doubt.

A muttered conversation between Fruz and Sanyesh behind him made the skin of his back crawl, though he could not understand a word. It would be bad enough to have to kill a man, without risking retaliation by the deceased's friends.

The two Parathai were evidently thinking along similar lines, for Sanyesh cried sharply: "Sham! I heard your talk with savage. You can not shoot Yezdeg for little thing like that! Fruz says so, too."

"What makes you so sure he's guilty?" said Hobart.

"Oh, savage knows. But suppose Yezdeg did? Not crime to kill useless fish-eater; everybody does. Not like real people."

Rollin Hobart needed just this opposition to make him really determined. "Well, they are real people from now on," he barked. "You heard my agreement."

"But Sham!" persisted Sanyesh. "If she real person, why not act like real person? Real woman like Parathai *never* go around with no clothes if not want man to take. If she real person, then she want man to take, and all her fault. Woman can not say to Parathaian, 'take,' then hit him when he try to; that insult. If not real person, then no crime to kill anyway."

"Makes no difference," snapped Hobart. "The new law of the Parathai is that the Ikthepeli are real people whether they wear clothes or not, and are to be treated as such. I, the Sham, say so."

But it appeared that the customs of the Barbarians were not as easily disposed of as that. Sanyesh continued his argument: "Was not law when Yezdeg killed woman. Can not kill man for breaking law nobody ever heard of!"

It was true; there was even a provision in the United States Constitution against ex-post-facto laws. Besides, Sanyesh and Fruz were by now gently fingering their sword hilts, the elder apologetically, the young retainer defiantly. The implication was that he might shoot one of the three, but the survivors would make sure he had no chance to reload.

By now Yezdeg was close enough for a hail, the sun gleaming on his yellow hair. He was caroling a song as if he had not a care in the world, and wiping an obviously bloody knife with a piece of thin leather.

The other two Parathai tensed themselves, watching Hobart. But the engineer merely said: "Time to start for home, boys," and led off.

After they had ridden a while in silence, Hobart pulled alongside of Sanyesh and asked: "I ought to know more about the laws of the Parathai. You recognize the right of self-defense?"

"That so," said the counselor, not at all chummy.

"How about duels?"

"We have. Depends. If fair fight, same weapons, same everything, no crime. If you pick fight and have big advantage, like gun, counts like murder. Man's family can take you before tribal assembly and get permission to kill you."

"How about responsibility for agents' acts?"

"What is that?"

"Suppose a man hires another man to kill a third man. Who's the murderer?"

"Each is half murderer. Instead of killing one man, we half kill both."

"How would you do that?" asked Hobart, intrigued despite his predicament.

"Easy; cut off heads halfway."

Hobart abandoned a nascent idea of sicking Theiax on the unregenerate Yezdeg. As far as he was concerned there was no distinction between

being decapitated halfway and completely. He would have to get Yezdeg killed by some less direct method. Not that Hobart wanted to kill Yezdeg or anybody else, abhorrent though the young Barbarian's act seemed to him. But he'd promised Gordius, and he'd promised Kai—

"Damn all promises!" he said aloud.

He jogged along in deep thought for a while. Then he directed Sanyesh: "Tell Yezdeg that he's evidently brave enough to kill a woman."

Sanyesh gave Hobart a glance glittering with suspicion, but spoke a sentence to Yezdeg. The latter seemed puzzled for a while, then answered with a long speech.

"He say," interpreted Sanyesh, "he brave man; killed many Marathai."

"I haven't seen him kill any Marathai, but I do know he killed a woman."

Again the pause for translation; Sanyesh reported: "He say he not kill real woman, only dirty fish-eater."

"O. K.," said Hobart amiably. "Then he's brave enough to kill a poor fish-eater woman."

This time Yezdeg frowned. Sanyesh announced: "He say he brave enough to kill fish-eater, or real woman, or real man, or anybody."

"Maybe so. I still haven't seen him kill a real man or even a real woman, but only a poor fish-eater, and a female at that."

When this was reported to Yezdeg, the young man's temper flared. He rose in his stirrups and shouted. When Sanyesh could get in a word, the old man told Hobart: "He say you insult him."

"Not at all," protested Hobart. "I'm just stating facts. You agree, don't you, that I haven't seen him kill any Marathai, and that if he killed the Ikthepeli woman he must obviously have been brave enough to do so?"

"I guess so," said Sanyesh grudgingly.

"All right then, ask him if what I say isn't true."

This time Yezdeg really went off with a bang.

He screeched and fingered his hilt menacingly. Hobart had prudently gotten out his cigarette lighter; he now applied it to the match of his gun.

He remarked as casually as he could manage: "You agree, don't you, Sanyesh, that I haven't attacked Yezdeg, and that if he goes for me I'm obviously entitled to shoot him in self-defense?"

"I guess so," muttered Sanyesh.

"Ask Fruz if I'm not right." Fruz agreed in a vague way; the dialectics of the quarrel had gotten beyond his simple mind.

Yezdeg was still shouting. Sanyesh interpreted: "He say he want fight you, but gun against sword no fair."

"Well—" Hobart hesitated; the last thing he wanted was a sword-duel with Yezdeg, who would probably make Salisbury of him. "Tell him that if he's brave enough to kill a fish-eater woman—"

He was drowned by another torrent of speech from Yezdeg, who had evidently become sufficiently familiar with the sound sequence "fish-eater woman" to be sensitive to it.

Sanyesh said: "He say swords no fair either. You beat Khurav; he best sword fighter of Parathai; you must be best sword fighter. You too good."

That was a break! What should he suggest? Wrestling? A look at Yezdeg's massive shoulders banished that idea. Boxing? It would hardly be fatal, and like most professional workers Hobart had not actually used his fists since he was an adolescent, though like most Americans he had a general impression that his people were a nation of natural-born boxers.

Then his eye fell on the red-and-black desert surface. "Tell him," he said, "that to make everything fair, since he insists on a fight, I'll fight him with stones."

Yezdeg was in a state where he would have agreed to fly swatters in a telephone booth. They dismounted.

"Hope you know what you do, prince," growled Theiax. "Want me to—"

"No. Sanyesh, do you and Fruz agree that, since insults are untrue statements and I haven't said anything untrue, I haven't insulted Yezdeg?"

"He say—I not know—"

"A thing is either an insult or it isn't, isn't it?" said Hobart triumphantly. The two mounted men nodded glumly. Hobart continued: "And that Yezdeg had challenged me; practically forced this fight on me? And I've done everything I could to give him his fair chance? And that no matter how it comes out, I haven't violated any of the laws and customs of the Parathai?"

Sanyesh found no way to deny all this, much as he might have liked to.

The combatants each collected a pile of the black stone balls, placed in front of him about thirty feet from his adversary. Hobart made winding-up motions to limber his arm, which had not thrown a baseball since his college days. Yezdeg tried clumsily to imitate this procedure. Finally each stood with a stone in each hand.

"Yikh!" shouted Sanyesh, acting as referee.

Yezdeg threw his first stone underhand and wildly. Hobart ignored it, swung both arms forward and up, then the right down, back, and forward, like the lunge of a snake. The stone whizzed past Yezdeg's right ear; the Barbarian threw his second even more wildly and stooped quickly to snatch more ammunition. Hobart waited until he started to straighten up again, estimated where his head would come by the time the stone got there, and let fly. Forehead and stone converged. *Crunch!*

They buried Yezdeg in the desert, quickly, lest his corpse suddenly liquefy in the heat. Kai's bones, if he consulted them, would give him the desired news now.

Hobart remounted, concealing as best he could the fact that he was suffering from a bad case of the shakes. Sanyesh and Fruz followed, looking at him with expressions of apprehensive awe.

As Hobart jogged along with his head bowed, Theiax questioned: "What is matter, prince? Everything you try to do, you do, but each time you look sadder! You want me to do trick? Look!" And the lion turned three somersaults in succession.

Hobart grinned wryly. He said: "Thanks, old bean, but if I felt like laughing I'd be rolling in the aisles at my own situation. If you want to cheer me up, you just figure out a way I can be a spectacular, hundred-percent failure!"

XII.

When Hobart reached his own tent, his companions started off toward their respective quarters. The engineer called: "Hey, Sanyesh, I'm not through with you yet!"

"What is?" queried the elder, turning back. Hobart led him into Sham's tent.

"Sanyesh," said Hobart, "I want to start a little war with the Marathai right away."

"War!" cried Sanyesh. The old man jumped up, hand on his sword. Hobart was alarmed until it transpired that the gesture was merely symbolic. "War! Ha! Cut! Stab! Shoot! Kill lots Marathai *Gr-r-r"* Then the ferocity suddenly left the leathery face; Sanyesh stared blankly. "Sham, can not start war right away! Must gather men, tell chiefs, plan battle!"

"How long will that take?"

"Five—six days."

"Oh, that's all right."

"Huh," grumbled Sanyesh, sitting down again. "If you not mean right away, why you say right

away? Get me all excited for nothing. You fight fair war?"

This question puzzled Hobart; he answered with a vague "Yeah, I suppose so."

"Good." Sanyesh went to the entrance and hollered into the darkness. Presently a dapper young Barbarian appeared; Hobart supposed him to be some sort of adjutant. Sanyesh spoke to him in Parathaian, then came back to Hobart and asked: "How many men you want take?"

"How many can we raise?"

"Twelve thousand, four hundred, nine," replied the elder promptly.

"O. K., we'll take 'em all."

Sanyesh whistled. "Why you say little war when you mean big war? You terrible hard Sham understand. I thought you meant little battle, one hundred each side."

"No, I'm playing for keeps. But what do you mean, a little battle with a hundred on each side? Do you pick even numbers like a game?"

"Sure, everybody knows that!"

Hobart shook his head wonderingly. "I can see where it might have advantages; you'd settle things without much bloodshed."

"Oh, it is not that," said Sanyesh comfortably. "Brave Parathai not afraid die, and even in big war hardly any get killed. Just in . . . inconvenient for so many leave during lambing season and things."

"I'm glad your wars are so unsanguinary, but how can that be if you're so brave?"

"Look, Sham," said Sanyesh with the air of explaining two times two to a backward child, "here is company of men, we suppose, yes? All right. Company can fight in formation, yes? Can not fight if dis . . . you know, all scattered. All right. Battle start. Men get knock down, pushed around. One or two get shot. Company not in formation. Can not fight, so run away. Not cowardly to run when can not fight, no?"

Hobart thought it was too bad that all the military units in history who had run at the first casualty had not had Sanyesh's logic to excuse themselves with. He abandoned the argument to get down to the material questions of organizing a campaign. The elder drew him a rough map on a piece of hide with charcoal and pointed out several alternative routes for the invasion.

"Really, I don't know," said Hobart. "Which one do you think best, Sanyesh?"

Sanyesh immediately indicated the most direct approach to Marathaia. Hobart shrugged. "O. K., if you say so," he said, though with mental reservations. He thought vaguely that he would have preferred an indirect approach, but since he could not really run the expedition he considered it wise to interfere with Sanyesh's judgment as little as possible.

His next shock came when he was sitting on horseback with Sanyesh outside the tent city the following afternoon and watching some troops go through evolutions. He asked casually: "Say, Sanyesh, who was that young fellow who sat in with us at our conference last night? Haven't seen him around today."

"Him herald," grunted the elder. "Gone to warn Marathai."

"*What?*"

"I said him gone warn Marathai; tell them when we attack, what route, everything."

"Oh, my lord! You mean he's a traitor or a spy?"

"No, no, Sham! You said you want fight fair war. All right. When you fight fair war, you send herald to challenge enemy, arrange battle place. Simple, yes?"

"Too damn simple," groaned Hobart. "Guess we'll have to change the plans, to provide for an unfair war."

"Can not do that," said Sanyesh calmly.

"Why the devil not?" snapped Hobart.

"Orders already given out, to get ready for fair war, battle in five days in Uzgend Valley. Now you want to change. So must countermand orders. Will take day to get everything back like was, and six days more get ready for unfair war. So we could not get to Uzgend Valley in time for battle. If we do not come, Marathai will be insulted, say we betray them. Then they invade us before we are ready. Impossible, Sham."

Hobart argued, but the elder was adamant. As he explained it, you prepared either for a fair or an unfair war. The preparations were different in each case, and therefore it was out of the question to prepare for one kind and then wage the other. You simply had to go back to the beginning and start over.

Hobart gave in for the time being, but during the night he had an idea for a daring coup to circumvent Sanyesh's quibbles. The next day he determined the fact that over two thousand men had been mobilized and armed. He ordered Sanyesh: "Tell 'em to get their blankets and enough food for twenty-four hours. I want to take 'em on an overnight practice march."

"Good," said Sanyesh, and carried out the order. The party got under way by noon. There were eight hundred forty-one infantrymen, sturdy phalangites with twenty-foot pikes, and the rest horsemen.

Hobart endured a desperately dull afternoon, occasionally thanking his stars that he was not a professional soldier and hence did not have to submit to such boredom often. About an hour before sunset they reached a place where the yellow sand they were crossing gave place sharply to white. Along the line of demarcation was a long

row of little obelisks, stretching out to the horizon on either side. The army halted, unordered, at the line.

"What's the matter, Sanyesh?" inquired Hobart.

"Border of Marathaia," said Sanyesh.

"I guessed that. But why are they stopping?"

"You say this practice march, not invasion, Sham."

"O. K., I know I did. But here's my idea: if we keep on going we'll reach the Marathaian capital late tonight. We can surprise them—"

"Impossible, Sham. Can not start training for fair war and change to unfair one in middle."

"Damn it!" cried Hobart. "You tell 'em we're going ahead! That's an order!"

Sanyesh looked surly, but translated the message to the subcommanders. These looked even more displeased, and passed it on to their men. Instead of resuming its march, the army stayed where it was, buzzing with angry talk. Then little groups of men detached themselves and began to trail off toward home.

"Hey!" yelled Hobart. "What's this? Mutiny?"

Sanyesh replied nonchalantly: "They desert. They say you deceived them. Not like deceitful Sham. Pretty soon I desert too, by damn."

"Tell 'em I just changed my mind—"

"Make no difference. Not like changeable Sham either."

Hobart swore himself blue in the face before he capitulated. "O. K.," he groaned. "Tell 'em I was just having a little joke. I'm a humorist, see?"

Sanyesh looked surprised. "You funny man? Good! Fine! Parathai like jokes." He raised himself in his stirrups and shouted: *"Gish!"*

The men wandered back slowly; there was more palaver, and the soldiers began to grin and laugh in reassuring fashion. A couple of them sidled up to Hobart, laughing and clapping him on the back and spouting Parathaian.

Then they suddenly seized his arms, twisted them behind his back, and tied his wrists. Another produced a rope whose end was doubled in an efficient-looking hangman's knot. The loop was slipped over Hobart's head, and the other end tossed over a branch of a convenient thorn tree.

"Hey!" screamed Rollin Hobart, "what's the idea?" But nobody answered him. The soldiers, grinning, tightened the rope; several hefty phalangites anchored themselves to the free end. Hobart saw with horrid clarity what they were going to do: slap his horse into motion, so that it would bound out from under and leave him dangling. His yells of protest made no impression.

Smack! A horny hand came down on the animal's rump. It leaped forward. Hobart braced himself for the shock of the noose. The rope tightened, jerked—and whipped over the branch to trail loosely behind.

A cavalryman cantered up alongside and gathered Hobart's reins; another untied his wrists. When he turned around he saw that the entire army was helpless with laughter, rocking in saddles and rolling on the ground.

"Sanyesh!" gasped the engineer. "What's the idea?"

"Haw-haw-haw!" bellowed the elder, his kalpak tilted over one eye with the force of his mirth. "You like joke, yes? *Ha-ha-ha-ho-ho-hoo!"*

Hobart kept silent lest a worse thing befall him. It did anyway. As soon as he dismounted, strong arms seized him and dropped him into an outstretched blanket. Those holding the blanket heaved, and Hobart bounced into the air. When he came down they heaved again, and up he went, higher. He churned the air with his limbs, trying not to come down headfirst and remembering that people had received broken necks that way. Up—down—up—down—he was dizzy and breathless when they finally spilled him out on the yellow sand. He reeled over to Sanyesh and clutched the elder's arm for support.

"Haw-haw-haw," chortled Sanyesh. "More fun. You like more jokes, yes?"

Hobart croaked: "Heh, heh, very funny. But tell 'em that's about all the humor I can stand for one day. We'll march back a couple of miles from the border and set up our tents, and after that I'll follow your advice on the campaign."

The thing that griped Hobart most was the thought that if he had simply let the whole crew desert without interference, he would have been free of this gang of logical lunatics. Damn obligations!

He was not quite through with the Parathaian sense of humor yet. His jangled nerves relaxed, after a frugal soldier's supper, over the thought that at least others would do the Sham's camp chores for him. As Sham, he had a real bed, or at least a mattress. He entered his tent with the hope of forgetting his plight by intimate contact therewith.

Some jokester had carefully piled, in the center of his bed, a bushel of horse manure.

It was past noon, days later, when Hobart's scouts brought word to him, the nominal commander of the army of the Parathai, that the Marathai were drawn up in battle array a short distance up the valley. That was not news to Rollin Hobart, who had already noted the twinkle of sunlight on military equipment. Sanyesh had begun to deploy their own army.

Hobart did not have too much confidence in the elder, but the only alternative would have been to try to run the war himself, an entirely impractical scheme. Even if he had known something about strategy and tactics, he could not in a few days have trained the Barbarians to use any other than

their traditional methods of fighting. At that, the terrain was such that the traditional methods were likely to prove as effective as any. They marched between vertical walls of black rock forty feet high, just far enough apart to allow the armies to deploy comfortably, but too close together to permit any wide flanking movements in the style of Subotai or Sherman.

Sanyesh gave all the orders, though he usually unbent far enough to inform Hobart of what he was doing after he had done it. His conferences with Hobart gave the troops the impression that their Sham was really running things as a Sham should. Since they could not understand how a man could be the commander and not be the commander at the same time, they were satisfied for the nonce. Oddly enough they showed no sign of resenting the fact that Hobart was most decidedly not one of them. That, he told himself gloomily, was no doubt due to the fact that they were all keyed up with the excitement of the invasion. How they would act after a defeat was something else; Hobart had his own ideas, and they were not nice.

Meanwhile he had nothing to do but to watch the bloody drama unfold with a certain degree of detachment; these people's actions were so devastatingly consistent, and their motives so childishly simple, that they never seemed quite real. If this attempt failed, he supposed he would have to let his whiskers grow and penetrate Marathaia single-handed disguised as a repairer of old clichés or something. He might have tried that in the first place, but such a piece of romantic knight-errantry was for him the last resort, not the first.

And not a soul among the Parathai had been able to help him in his quest for Hoimon. The late Khurav had, at the beginning of his reign, let it be known that any ascetic who wanted immediate promotion to the rank of martyr had merely to set foot inside his principality. A few had availed themselves of the offer, but after the supply of would-be martyrs had been exhausted there had been no more contact between the brotherhood of ascetics and the Parathai.

He turned to Sanyesh. "Better set up the step-ladder."

"That so," said Sanyesh, and gave the order. The stepladder was Hobart's one contribution to the military art, and was just what its name implied, except that it was larger than most step-ladders. From its top he could see over the heads of men mounted and men afoot, and thus keep a better tab on the progress of the battle than if he had remained on the flat valley floor.

He climbed the rungs. "Theiax!" he called, but the lion had slipped out of sight among the soldiers, who, once they had gotten used to him, had become inordinately proud of such a formidable ally.

Directly in front of Hobart was the phalanx, six thousand men strong, holding their twenty-foot pikes upright like the bristles of a gigantic brush. On each side of them, small bodies of light infantry were getting into formation; beyond the light infantry, the heavy cavalry. The light cavalry—horse archers—were strung out in a thin line across the entire front of the army. If the idea was to fool the enemy as to their dispositions, Hobart doubted whether it would work, since the Parathai always fought in one invariable formation.

The enemy were now close enough for individuals to be distinguished but not recognized. They appeared to have come to a halt, too, in a somewhat different formation. There was a heavy block of cavalry on each wing, and between the wings stretched a chain of infantry—squares of pikemen alternating with oblongs of musketeers.

A couple of gaudy persons were now out in front of the respective armies, shouting at each other. Hobart leaned down toward where Sanyesh sat his placid black horse, and asked what that signified.

"Challenges," said Sanyesh. "You see."

The gaudy men blew on trumpets and returned to their own lines. Presently a horseman rode out from the Marathai army and cantered up and down the yellow sand between the two armies. The Marathai cheered. Another man spurred out from among the Parathai; now the Marathai were politely silent while their foes cheered. The two horsemen drew up at opposite ends of the space between the armies, which were sitting and slouching in the attitudes of relaxed spectators.

The soldiers quieted down, so that the muffled hoofbeats of the duellists came clearly as the challenger and the challengee galloped at each other. They passed each other too quickly for Hobart to see just what had happened, except that one man stayed in his saddle and continued on, reining up, while the other flopped out of his with the first man's lance sticking through his body.

From the cheers Hobart inferred that the Marathaian was the winner. This man now rode closer to the Parathai lines, calling out his challenge. Sure enough, another went out to meet him. This time they met with a splintering crack; pieces of broken lance soared into the air. The riders circled back, dropping the butts of their broken lances and drawing their swords. There was a brief confusion of swinging arms and whirling blades, and a metallic clatter; then one of them pitched out onto the sand: again, it transpired, the Parathaian.

Sanyesh turned a leathery, worried face up to his lord. "Bad," he growled. "If we lose all challenges, we lose battle."

"Why?"

"Always happens. Ah, look!"

The low yellow shape of Theiax was scudding

over the sand toward the hostile cavalryman, tail stiffly erect and swaying like a mast as the lion galloped. There were shouts of warning from the Marathai side, but even as the champion made vague movements to prepare for this sudden assault, Theiax left the ground in a tremendous leap, struck the champion fair and square, and carried him out of the saddle on the far side. The riderless horse snorted and bounded off, circling the rectangle defined by the armies and the valley walls in a frantic effort to escape. Meanwhile the lion stood over the Marathaian and shook him so that his arms and legs flopped limply like those of a doll. Eventually Theiax tired of this amusement and trotted back to his own army.

But now the heralds were at it again. "What's up?" asked Hobart as the Parathaian herald pushed his way through the ranks to Sanyesh and spoke.

Sanyesh explained: "Protest. General Baramyash say his men not challenge lion; no fair; and unless we—"

"So what?" interrupted Hobart.

"If we can not get through challenges, we can not get around to battle!" cried Sanyesh.

"Bunk. It's driving me nuts, sitting around and waiting to get it over with." Hobart reached up and grasped the rodent skull, and called: "Kai!" No result; Hobart raised his voice, "KAI!"

"You need not break my ears," said a shrill voice beside him, and there was the medicine man, grinning like some depraved yellow idol. "What you want, Sham?"

Hobart pointed at the hostile army. "Can you break 'em up?"

"I do not know. Maybe. What you want, rain spell?"

"No! Something with punch in it; a monster, for instance."

At that instant Sanyesh called up: "Watch out, Sham; enemy coming!"

The hostile commander, Sham Khovind's son Baramyash—or Valangas—had evidently lost patience, for sharp commands were ringing up and down his array. The Marathaians cheered and began to move.

Kai frowned. "I can conjure serpent. Look!" He made passes and incanted:

"Borabora tahaa,
Totoya manua;
Gorontalo morea,
Niihau korea,
Kealakekua!"

And a spotted viper a yard long appeared at the base of the stepladder. The immediate effect was to cause a nearby horse to rear and throw its rider.

"Take it away!" cried Hobart. "Not here; can't you plant a few thousand among the Marathai?"

Kai spread his hands. "One is all I can do at one time. What you think, I am great magician? I am just poor starving fish-eater—"

"Shut up!" yelled Hobart in exasperation. Sanyesh had departed to line up his men; the only familiar faces nearby were those of Kai, Hobart's horse standing near the stepladder, and the groom holding the horse. Hobart hated to think of what would happen if his army started to run away before he had a chance to climb down and mount. "What else can you do? Open the earth?"

"A little," whimpered Kai, "like this:

"Aia aia alala,
Walla walla potala
Nuuanu nukuhiva
Tokelau kapaaa:
Rota, haleakala!"

The earth trembled and groaned; the stepladder swayed perilously, hung on the edge of an overset, then settled back. A crack six inches across had appeared in the sand near it. All the soldiers nearby looked at the crack with horror and aversion.

Hobart, whose fingers had gripped the stepladder with the violence of reflex, drew breath. He shouted at Kai: "You fool, one more like that and you'll panic my whole army! Can't you do anything to the *other* side?"

Kai waved his hands. "I never said I was great magician! Just poor starving—"

He was drowned out by a gathering thunder of hoofs as the Marathaian cavalry got under way, straight for their opposite numbers on the Parathaian wings. From his eminence Hobart could clearly see that his own cavalry was badly outnumbered. Perhaps his own cavalry saw it, too, for as Baramyash's lancers poured down on them, their formation lost its sharp corners; horses wheeled this way and that, and the Parathaian wings dissolved into amorphous crowds of men riding hell-for-leather to the rear. The Marathaians shrieked their triumph and tried to catch up with them; friend and foe vanished down the valley in a great cloud of dust. Hobart remembered Sanyesh's explanation that the Barbarians considered the slightest disorganization an excuse for flight, on grounds of irrefutable Aristotelian logic.

Flight and pursuit had occurred so suddenly that the infantry on both sides had not even gotten into motion. Hobart called down to Sanyesh: "Think we can smash those guys before the cavalry comes back?"

"How is your magician?" parried Sanyesh.

"Lousy."

"I know he is that, but does he know any magic?"

"Not enough. Kai, what else do you know?" said Hobart, shaking the medicine man's shoulders.

"I can make wildflowers spring up. I stopped pestilence among my poor people last year. I can call fish into nets—"

"All too pacific. You savages are too civilized for your own good. Sanyesh, tell 'em to go ahead." He had been mistaken, he saw, in not expending one of his three calls via the rodent skull for a staff talk with Kai in advance. He had wanted to save the calls as long as possible—false economy.

The phalanx was getting under way; the men of the leading ranks lowered their pikes and tramped forward to the beat of drums; the rest followed with their pikes upright. They would gradually pick up speed until they hit the enemy at a run—if they hit the enemy at all. Something might happen—

Crash! The Marathaian line spilled flame and smoke. Cries of pain and alarm—Kai half climbed, half fell down the ladder as a couple of musket balls whizzed close; Rollin Hobart followed at a more dignified pace. *Crash!* The muskets of the second rank went off; a few pikes toppled. Hobart climbed aboard his horse as the animal began to jitter. *Crash!* The phalanx slowed up and came to a dead stop. *Crash!* They began to retreat; Sanyesh galloped around them, yelling, but they kept on backing until they were out of effective range.

The first rank of the musketeers had not finished reloading, so there was a pause. Sanyesh called to Hobart: "You do something damn well quick, Sham! Marathai charge soon—"

Then an idea hit Hobart like a blinding flash. "Kai! Rain on the enemy, quick!"

He had to repeat it before the medicine man got the idea; but then the Ikthepel began:

"Marekula eromanga—"

A fierce little cloud formed over the Marathai line, and down came the rain with a swish. Sanyesh and his officers got the phalanx back into something like its original square. The Marathai turned angry faces up at the sky, right and left; then in response to commands began to advance, pikes first, muskets in the intervals. The phalanx took a few rippling, uncertain steps forward. Around the brush-bristle of pikes Hobart could see irregular, perplexed movements among the musketeers, who were trying, with no success, to shoot muskets whose matches had been rained out!

Two guns did go off, *pop! pop!* but that salvo merely encouraged the Parathaians, whose leading ranks saw quite clearly what the matter was. With a self-confident roar the phalanx got into its stride again, and clanked ponderously toward the foe, who, however did not await its coming. With wet muskets, and pikes alone greatly outnumbered, the Marathai performed the same dissolving-act that had previously been exhibited by the Parathaian cavalry; in thirty seconds the whole mass was streaking for the rear, dropping pikes and muskets as they ran, some of them even shedding helmets, cuirasses, and greaves to enable them to run faster.

When the Marathaian cavalry cantered back up the valley just before sunset, they were singing, waving things plundered from the Parathaian supply train, and feeling pretty good generally. They had chased the hostile horse clear out the lower end of the valley with practically no loss. But when they came to the site of the battle, they found nothing whatever but a few dead and wounded soldiers, and a vast quantity of military equipment, including a couple of thousand muskets, scattered around the valley floor. The Marathai consulted among themselves, came to the same conclusion as to what had happened, and quietly departed thence. If your side lost a battle it lost, and that was that.

The next day Rollin Hobart, firmly established in the Marathaians' main tent city, brought a force down the valley to collect the booty and such of the wounded as had survived the night.

Kai was watching the interment of the men who had fatally intercepted musket balls, and remarked: "All those good deads going to waste. What bad, wicked people everybody but my people are! I go now, Sham; you call again when you need me. Good-by!" With a swish and a swirl, Kai vanished.

XIII.

Rollin Hobart had gone on the sound theory that if he piled enough tasks on old Sanyesh, the counselor would probably not have time to plot any mischief. That mischief there would sooner or later be, Hobart had no doubt, in view of the fact that Sanyesh, though not particularly friendly, was his only effective point of contact with his alleged subjects. If Sanyesh decided to make himself Sham, there was little that Hobart could do to prevent it. If he liquidated Sanyesh, he would be in a worse position than he was now.

His only hope appeared to be to act quickly before any seditions broke out; rescue Argimanda, send her to her father, and then quickly disappear. He'd even forestall any revolts, against him at any rate, by abdicating and putting some other Parathaian in his present hot seat. Otherwise—good lord, if events followed precedent in this continuum, the Marathai might decide that they wanted him as Sham, also! They might even fight the Parathai for the privilege; or some local Solomon would suggest the compromise of slicing Hobart in halves and giving one to each tribe.

But by then Hobart hoped he would be far away, disguised, and proceeding with his proper business of finding Hoimon and getting back home. Home!

Good old New York; dear, respectable, congenial engineering position; kindly, interesting friends—what if some of them did think he was an opinionated old grind? He was not really obstinate—nonsense! He just knew what he wanted—

Thus thought Rollin Hobart of Higgins & Hobart as he jogged back to the main tent city of the Marathai, followed by creaking wagonloads of pikes and muskets.

When he almost reached the ineffective ditch and rampart, Sanyesh trotted out on a horse, followed by a couple of retainers and a standard bearer. It was hardly any distance, but as a petty chieftain it was beneath his dignity to walk when he could ride. The old man looked careworn as he reported: "I sent man to Logaia, tell Gordius about battle, like you said. Half our cavalry come in, and some Marathai. Say they join us if we give them back families. One of them know about Laus. Speak Logaian good. You want talk?"

"Yes, right away," responded Hobart. "And tell these Marathai we'll gladly give them back their families without obligation, though we'd naturally be glad to have them join us, too." This generous gesture might or might not be good statesmanship; if it were not, Hobart's successor could worry about the effects thereof.

The informative Marathaian turned out to be a young chief of a hundred families named Gorvath, on whose neck Hobart felt like falling in his relief at being able to converse fluently for a change.

Gorvath asserted: "If you are reasonably careful, Sham, you can have all of Marathaia in a month. Khovind and Baramyash have their retainers, but the rest of our army is scattered into fragments all over the country. I do not think Sham Khovind will be able to rally many, for the word has gone out that you have the luck of Zhav with you."

"Hm-m-m," said Hobart. "You don't seem much concerned about the fate of your late commanders."

Gorvath shrugged, shrewd, humorous wrinkles springing into his weather-beaten face. "I, too, think you have the luck of Zhav—or Nois, whichever you prefer."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that our supreme lord seems to have picked you for a rapid rise in the affairs of the world—how far, none knows yet."

"Literally?"

Gorvath frowned. "I do not understand; I do not lie, if that is what you mean. So, naturally, being a man of sense, I intend to attach my fortunes to yours as early as possible. I shall not be surprised if Sham Khovind and his son come to the same way of thinking."

Oh, yeah? snorted Hobart mentally. They'd have to catch him first. Aloud he said: "What can you tell me about the wizard, Laus?"

Gorvath chuckled. "Rascals always fall out; they could not be rascals otherwise. Laus flew in here last week on those fearsome wings that turn into a cloak, with King Gordius' daughter for a hostage. Shortly after, Baramyash appeared, having spent four years in disguise at Gordius' court. It was learned that their little plot with the Logaian chancellor for the destruction of the royal family and the conquest and looting of the kingdom had miscarried because of the arrival of one Prince Rollin, who, it seems, is now Sham Rollin as well.

"What happened then is not known to me in detail; but I believe that Baramyash and Sham Khovind, reasoning that a wizard who had just betrayed one master might do likewise with the next, decided to destroy this dangerous ally and use Gordius' daughter for a hostage themselves. They believed that, between the possession of the princess and that of most of the muskets in Logaia, they would not need Laus' magic to overcome Gordius.

"Laus, I suppose, was warned of this by his magical arts, for he speedily put on his wings and flew off with the princess before anything happened to him."

Hobart inquired: "Where did the wizard go?"

"That is not known, though he was flying due south when last seen."

Hobart pondered. Sham Khovind's routed infantry had mostly fled north and east; the Marathaian cavalry had dispersed in all directions; probably a good deal of it had gone south, since this course would take it away from Logaia and Parathaia and also away from the Parathaian army to the east of it. If he went south with a small party, he risked running into a larger force of Marathai— But if he waited till he had everything under control, events would fasten their claws on him—he didn't know just how, but they would.

He stood up suddenly, and called: *"Fruz, Sanyesh gvakh!"* The phrase "Fetch Sanyesh" had become to Hobart an almost automatic reaction to every situation involving Barbarians. He added, to Gorvath: "If you want to throw in with me, you can come along right now. We're going after Laus!"

As he got ready, his mind clicked off plans and alternatives: They'd take an escort of about a hundred, with the fastest horses available. He'd whistle up Kai—no, better wait till they located Laus; the savage had probably never ridden a horse and would balk at trying. If they were chased, they'd simply outrun their pursuers. By now Hobart was, if not an expert rider, at least not a conspicuously bad one. How would they find the wizard? Simple: Hobart remembered a remark

to the effect that animals were disturbed by the presence of magic.

Sanyesh, when he had his orders, went off shaking his head at the eccentricities of the new Sham. But in two hours—that is, shortly before sunset—he had the hundred light cavalrymen with horses in duplicate. Hobart left the elder to hold down the lid in the camp and took Gorvath for guide and interpreter. Theiax padded along expectantly. Suppose the Marathaian led them into a trap, or got them lost, or suppose Laus had not flown this way at all. Hobart did not care. He was willing to take almost any risk to get this next and last task out of his way; and, judging from his experiences so far, he could afford to take pretty steep ones.

They crawled along, steering by the stars, at a slow walk. Hobart estimated that they had covered about thirty miles when the sun popped up; it was pure guesswork, but it seemed likely that Laus had flown farther than this from the tent city before alighting. He gave orders for spreading out over a front of several miles, with instructions to the men to report to him any signs of uneasiness on the part of their mounts. The horses, after being up all night, looked as if it would take something out of the ordinary to rouse them.

They presently left the savannah they had been traversing and entered a stretch of hill country. Each hill was low and rounded and exactly like the next, even to the clump of dry shrubs on its top. The only animal life was an occasional bird or lizard; there was no sign of Marathaian soldiery.

Hobart yawned with fatigue and boredom. Every piece of this land fitted into such an exact and limited pattern: there were a certain number of types of topography, conical mountains, dome-shaped hills, flat plain, and so on; a certain number of types of cover, jungle, grass, or nothing, as the case might be; and a limited number of combinations of these. He had not seen all the possible combinations yet, but he was sure he could imagine them, so what was the use of touring the world to see them? All he asked was a chance to snatch up Argimanda with one quick pounce; to see her safely packed off to her father, and— Such questions as who should be Sham of this or that tribe and what should be done with the Logaian muskets did not interest him.

Thus he mused as hour crawled up the back of dull hour. It was nearly noon when a horseman cantered up and threw an unintelligible string of sounds at him. "He says," explained Gorvath, arriving next, "that the horses out on the right wing are balking. Is that what you wanted?"

"Yep; round 'em up," snapped Hobart. Let Laus turn him into a small black cinder; anything would be better than eternally crawling around this loathsome world.

The Parathai quickly guessed the cause of the horses' unease, and themselves showed no eagerness to come to close quarters with the wizard. Hobart supposed he could have roused them to excitement with the right sort of pep talk, but he had never given a pep talk in his life and did not propose to begin now. He told them to spread out as far as possible around the circle of magical influence. Then he dismounted and tied his horse in a bush. Neither nags nor Barbarians were likely to be of much help.

He grasped the rodent skull and called: "Kai!"

There was an opacity in the air, as of a whirl of dust, and a swishing sound; then the medicine man stood before him. As Hobart explained what they had to do, Kai's broad saffron face got longer and longer.

"I am not good magician!" he wailed. "I just know a few little spells, keep my poor people from harm!"

"Anything's better than nothing," continued Hobart implacably. "What could you do to ward off or neutralize Laus' spells?"

"Well—let me see—I can make— *Ouf!* Please stop your lion from sniffing my leg, Sham; it makes me n-nervous!"

The thing that Kai claimed he could make was a sort of shield which would deflect all but the strongest spells. It was made of twigs and fish skin. Twigs could be had from any bush, but fish were something else.

"Conjure 'em up," said Hobart.

"No water," mourned Kai, spreading his hands.

"Good heavens, rain some!" barked Hobart. The fact that Kai knew some real honest-to-gosh magic did not necessarily imply that the savage was any genius. With Theiax's help they scooped out a depression two feet across, and Kai's spell beginning *"Marekula eromanga"* brought down a downpour a yard in diameter which soon filled the hole. Another spell filled the water with squirming fish. Here Kai's thinking processes broke down again; Hobart had to suggest to the rattled necromancer that he could conjure up his magic bone skinning knife to complete the operation.

The shield was of the general size and appearance of a child's homemade kite, with fish skin instead of paper. Kai explained: "You hold it in front of you like a real shield. Careful; it is not strong like real one."

Hobart asked Kai what else he knew in the way of spells. Kai seriously counted them off on his fingers; the only one that was at all promising was a hornet conjure.

"O. K.," sighed Hobart. "Come on."

"What? Oh, no, not me! I could not stand against great Laus; I never went to college of magic; just poor fish-eater—"

"Come on!" roared Hobart, "if you want to save your people from something really nasty!"

They trudged cautiously among the low hills, until Theiax halted with one forefoot raised, laid back his ears, and gave an infinitesimal growl. Hobart peered and sighted a small projection on the top of the farthest hill within their field of vision.

The engineer lit the match of his musket. He explained in a low voice: "I'm going to try to sneak up for a shot; if that doesn't work, we'll rush him. I'll hold the shield up until I'm close enough to get at him with the sword; you two stay behind me so it'll protect you, too."

Theiax objected: "Suppose he flies away?"

"That's so." Hobart fingered his chin. "What sort of wings does that robe of his develop?"

"Vulture, I think," said Theiax.

"Fine! Kai, if he starts to fly, you rain on him, hard! If you can soak his feathers, it ought to bring him down."

When there was but a single hill between them and the one on which Laus' tower stood, they crept slowly up to the top and looked through the bushes. Hobart heard a sharp intake of breath from Theiax; he looked again, and caught sight of a human figure on top of the tower, in a gauzy garment—Argimanda.

"Where's Laus?" whispered Hobart.

"I can feel his presence," muttered the lion. "Ah, there, around base of tower!"

The tower itself was a ruinous old structure, practically a simple cylinder with a single opening —the doorway. This entrance was partly blocked by the heads and necks of two enormous snakes, lying one over the other, with bodies extending out of sight around the base of the structure.

"Amphisbaena," rumbled Theiax.

"What's that?"

"Snake with two heads, one each end. Alaxius says Laus could be one, but I never see it done."

"Ready everybody?" murmured Hobart. He propped the shield up in front of him and extended his musket through the bushes. He should be able to hit one of the heads at this distance— but which one? Did Laus' human intelligence reside in one, or both, and, if the former how was one to know?

Get it over with, he thought, heart pounding; he sighted and squeezed. *Boom!* The butt kicked his shoulder; by moving his head quickly to get the puff of smoke out of his line of vision, he was able to catch a spurt of dust, twenty feet short of the reptilian heads and to the right. Hell he should have remembered that a smoothbore matchlock wasn't a Winchester automatic. "Rain!" he barked over his shoulder to Kai.

Kai began at once. The snake heads had reared at the shot. One of them swung slowly, like a man panoraming a movie camera; the other darted about aimlessly. Then the slow-moving head ducked into the tower door; the whole monstrous creature flowed after it. The other head disappeared around the tower and presently reappeared on the other side, bringing up the rear

The rain cloud boiled and dropped its contents; when a few seconds later Laus, in his usual dark gown and conical hat, came out on the roof, it was into a miniature cloudburst. The two small figures on the tower top twinkled about, dark chasing light.

Hobart thrust the hot musket barrel into Kai's hands. "Use this for a club!" he shouted. "Come on!"

They burst out of the shrubbery and pounded down the hill they were on, Hobart drawing his swords and holding the little kite stiffly in front of him.

"Look!" cried Theiax in an anguished roar. Laus had caught up with the princess; still struggling, she was carried aloft in the arms of the wizard, who soared from the tower on immense black vulture's wings. "Aloft" is not quite the right word, for, despite desperate flaps, the pair flew lower and lower, slanted across the gap between the tower hill and an adjacent one, and came down on the latter's gentle stony slope.

Hobart angled toward them. Laus, holding the kicking and beard-pulling Argimanda under one arm, whisked out a wand with the other.

"Theiax!" yelled Hobart. "Come back here!" But the lion had bounded out from the protection of the shield and charged straight for the wizard with an earth-shaking roar. Hobart was just near enough to see the wizard's face working and catch a whisper of his incantation; Theiax in midleap shrank to the size of an alley cat; bounced and sprawled on landing.

Hobart kept running. He could hear Kai's panting behind him, growing fainter, either because the short savage could not keep up or did not wish to. Laus went to work on Hobart, crying:

"Fabörle dyor murtho
Tarwözei kounovir!
Wörngorä houdorzhar
Meveiler shaibaudir!
SIRVZASHTAUI!"

Nothing happened, except that Hobart's left hand, holding the shield, tingled as though from a slight electric shock. Laus started another:

"Wargudviz vlapeisez
Thorgwast tha zistal . . ."

But he stopped when it became obvious that Hobart would reach him before he finished. He dropped Argimanda, and in a twinkling changed from venerable wizard back into amphisbaena.

Hobart heard a squeal of fright from Kai, behind, as the monster poured down the hill toward them with the irresistible deliberation of a lava flow. The leading head was undoubtedly the dominating one; it stared at Hobart with wicked intelligence, and even looked a little like Laus. The other, thrashing about futilely on the after end, was just the head of a big snake.

Hobart instinctively put up the shield to protect himself as he swung his sword down on the horny snout. The sword bounced up with a clang, and the jaws clomped on the shield. Hobart snatched his hand back just in time. The head crunched the shield and spat out the remains, then lunged at Hobart again. The engineer skipped back out of range, swung, missed, and whirled himself clear around. He got a glimpse of Kai, dancing with terror thirty feet off. "Get busy!" he yelled, then had to leap to avoid another lunge. He was not, he feared, built for the part of Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. He got in a crack on the amphisbaena's snout as it recovered, but without apparent effect. Have to try for an eye—

"Watch out!" shrilled Kai. "He turn back into wizard, you have no shield!"

Wish he would turn back, thought Hobart; while Laus could obviously not recite cantrips and make passes in his present form, the engineer was sure that if he returned to the human one, he,

Hobart, could cut him down before he could get out another spell.

A toy-sized Theiax had bounded up onto the middle of the serpent's back and was vainly trying to rip it open with his little teeth and claws. Kai, gathering his courage, ran in and whacked the snake's back once with the butt of the musket; but then the other head came slithering around with open jaws, and the medicine man scuttled back out of the way of imminent harm. "I make spell!" he called.

Hobart, wielding his sword in both sweaty hands, heard the incantation going off behind him; the air was filled with a vicious hum and then with hundreds of yellow-and-black striped insects: hornets!

In a twinkling the amphisbaena's scaly hide was dotted with them. But they did not stay there long, once they found the job of stinging through the horny scales hopeless; they rose in a menacing cloud. Hobart yelled as a dozen fiery stabs of pain lanced through his skin; stumbled back, away from the monster, as he swatted at his new tormentors.

That guy Siegfried had had a cinch— He heard a scream of real agony behind him; a glance showed that the hornets had gone as one hornet for the most inviting target on the Marathaian landscape: Kai's unprotected skin. The savage dropped the musket and ran as Hobart had never seen a man run before. Then the amphisbaena was pouring down again.

Hobart spread his feet and waited. If he could only get an eye— The monster waited also for a few seconds, while it caught its sluggish reptilian breath. The dominating head reared back, threatening; Hobart quailed at the sight of unmistakable venom fangs as the jaws opened halfway. Out of his lateral field of vision he saw the other half looping slowly around, and the second head getting ready for business. Like a boxer's two fists— The dominating head made a tentative stab forward; halted as Hobart jerked back his sword— *clunk!* Hobart had a flashing vision of the musket butt, swung by Argimanda's arms, come down squarely between Laus' eyes.

"Look out!" screamed the princess.

Hobart glanced around just as the second head began its lunge. He dived to one side, landed on his shoulder, and rolled to his feet again as the head shot through the air he had just displaced. It kept on going—and caught the dominating head squarely by the muzzle!

The part of the snake adjacent to the dominating head writhed in protest, but now the secondary head had worked its jaws over the whole of the dominating one. Once begun, the process knew no stopping. The secondary head's loosely hinged lower jaw moved, right side forward and then left. As Hobart watched in fascinated amaze, the great reptilian loop shortened and thickened till the whole had the shape of an inner tube; then that of a doughnut. When Hobart did not see how it could swallow itself any further, the doughnut coalesced into a scaly globe the size of a pushball; it shrank swiftly—and vanished.

Argimanda stood with her thin, wet garment clinging to her and little Theiax cradled in her arms. Hobart looked at her foolishly. "Where'd he go?" he finally asked.

"He swallowed himself," replied the princess.

"How?"

"When I hit the thinking head I must have dazed it for the moment, so that it no longer controlled the other. And the other, being a simple serpent's head, had to obey its instincts; once it had caught the thinking head it could do naught but swallow."

"I see that, but where did it *go?*"

Argimanda said patiently: "How long would you say the whole amphisbaena was?"

"Oh, about fifty feet."

"And how fast did the inferior head swallow?"

Hobart thought. " 'Bout five feet a minute."

"Well, then, what would you expect to happen at the end of ten minutes?"

He took her hand and led her down the rest of the hillside and back the way he had come. "Young lady," he said at last, "you can thank your Nois the androsphinx didn't ask that one!"

XIV.

There was no sign of Kai, though they looked. Hobart surmised: "Probably remembered to disappear. These stings are the very devil. Any get you?"

"No, they did not touch me," said Argimanda. "Can I do aught for yours, dear prince?"

"Thanks, but I'll stand them until we get back to camp."

"Camp? You mean one of the tent cities of the Marathai?"

"Uh-huh." Hobart gave the princess a brief account of recent events. He finished: "I'm taking you back there now, and I'll ship you off to your father first thing."

She sighed a little. "I owe you life a second time, Rollin. There is nothing I would not do for you if I could. But—you have not changed your mind?"

"Nope. Sorry," muttered Hobart, becoming suddenly very busy at reloading his musket. But she did not embarrass him by discussing their relationship further. Not the least painful part of his predicament was the fact that Argimanda was so considerably obliging that she never gave him an excuse for getting angry with her.

She put down Theiax, who trotted mournfully behind them, misjudging distances and bumping into things. His voice was a shrill wail as he

protested: "I am insulted! I am humilinated! Prince, can you not get my size back?"

"Nope, old fella; not my department."

"You should not kill Laus! He could restore me."

"Didn't kill him, really. He committed suicide. Matter of fact," Hobart continued, turning to Argimanda, "I haven't done any of the noble deeds that you and the other people of this cockeyed world insist on crediting me with. It's been just dumb luck, plus my ignoble and selfish efforts to save my own neck."

Argimanda smiled. "Your fairy godmother must have given you modesty along with your heroism, Rollin."

"I'm not a hero!" cried Hobart despairingly. "I'm just an ordinary, practical engineer, and not a very nice guy at that! I'm self-centered and set in my ways; my friends think I'm dull and pedantic—"

"A scholar as well as a hero!" breathed the princess rapturously. "I would not have believed such a combination of virtues possible! If you would only let me serve you, however humbly—"

"Please, let's not discuss it!"

"Very well, my prince." There was a trace of moisture in her eye, but she blinked it away and smiled with heart-rending bravery. "I shall be happy enough, just being near you for a few hours!"

Hobart clenched fists and teeth, torn between desires to yell "Shut up!", to run off and leave this infuriatingly lovely person, and to grovel in apologies. In the end he marched briskly straight ahead, musket on shoulder and grimness on face. His pace did not bother Argimanda, who swung along easily on her superb, long legs. Thus they reached the escort in less time than it had taken Hobart and Kai to find the wizard's lair.

Somebody called "Hi!" from the top of one of the hills and clumped down toward them; it was Gorvath. "I did not expect to see you so soon; or ever, for that matter! You have the lady?" The Barbarian doffed his kalpak and bowed to Argimanda. "I am dazed by her beauty!" Gorvath staggered a little to show that when he said dazed, he meant dazed. He recovered and said to Hobart in a stage whisper: "She would make a wonderful Shami!"

"No doubt," answered Hobart dryly. "But we're in a hurry; round up the boys."

Gorvath started to go; then caught sight of Theiax, who tried to hide behind a shrub. The Marathaian stared, then burst into uncontrollable laughter. "Hahahaha—the noble beast has shrunk! Did you wash him in too-hot water, or what?" Gorvath staggered off, still laughing and holding his midriff.

Theiax caterwauled: "If I get my size back, I teach that ignorant one not to rickidule me!"

When Hobart had seen Argimanda mounted, he swung aboard his own horse, and called down to Theiax: "Think you can hold on without scratching me or the horse? O. K.; jump!"

When Theiax had settled himself across the saddle, he turned his small yellow eyes up to Hobart, and asked: "What is this about you not marrying Argimanda?"

"That's right." Hobart repeated the protest that had now become automatic from frequent use, about not giving a damn for all the pomp an alien world had to offer.

Theiax glowered, and spat: "If I get my size back, you do not walk out on my princess so nanchaloncy!"

"I know it," chuckled Hobart. "Look here, old man, you wouldn't want to force Argimanda into a loveless marriage, would you?"

"Not loveless. She loves *you*."

"An unhappy one, then."

"If she loves you, she is happy with you no matter. You should make her happy, just as I make happy lionesses who love me. But not any more," he concluded mournfully, twisting his head to inspect his diminutive shape.

"Well, damn it, an inequitable one, then!"

"Inetiquable . . . ineq—oh, tea leaves! You are too smart man for me. Where do you go after you leave my princess?"

"Back to my own world, I hope."

"Are there lions in that world?"

"Yes, but not where I live. They're not allowed in the streets and houses."

Theiax made a gentle buzzing noise that presumably indicated thought, then came out with: "I love Argimanda, but I love my dignity, too. I must not go back to Oroloia; every dog in city hears about my new size and waits chance to chase and humilinate me. Could I go with you?"

"I'll think about it," replied Hobart. "I'd have to pass you off as just an unusual kind of pussy cat, you know."

"I know." The social lion dropped the subject, and spent the rest of the trip reminiscing about his love affairs with assorted wild lionesses. Hobart found the stories very rare indeed, for Theiax, being a feline, had no inhibitions in such matters. But the engineer tried not to laugh, not wishing to insult his little friend's melancholy. Come to think of it, a confirmed bachelor ought to have some sort of pet, and Hobart's last dog had died a couple of years previously. Theiax would have to be taught to confine his conversation to the privacy of the apartment—

"Sham!" cried Gorvath. "Somebody has preceded us to the camp. Look!" He indicated a swath of trampled grass that even Hobart could see marked the passage of a large body of horsemen.

"What do you make of it?" the engineer inquired.

"I do not know, but it might be Sham Khovind and his son."

"Suppose they attacked the camp?"

"They might have, though they could hardly have surprised it in daylight." Gorvath, with a sweep of his arm, indicated the featureless plain whose grass would not have concealed anything larger than Theiax.

"Guess we'll have to go see," Hobart announced. Another hour's ride brought the tent city up over the skyline, in the form of a little dark irregularity between the blue sky and the yellow sea of grass.

"Should we scout?" asked Gorvath.

Hobart privately wished the Barbarians would not consult him on matters of military strategy and tactics, but he replied: "If we go any closer, they'll see us sure. And I don't propose to crawl ten miles on my belly through the grass. Suppose we send Theiax. He's small enough— *Ouch!* You little devil—"

The social lion had dug a claw sharply into Hobart's thigh, then jumped down. He mewed: "You make fun of me! I do not let people make fun of me! I am lion, even if small!"

"O. K., O. K., I wasn't making fun of you. I was saying that your size makes you just perfect for reconnoitering the camp; there's not another man or beast in this world that could do it as well!"

"Oh, that is different. I am sorry I scratch." Mollified, Theiax set off at an easy lope through the grass, with which he blended to invisibility after a few leaps.

The rest of the party disposed themselves to await the lion's return; some dismounted, others remained slouched in their saddles, eating, smoking, or snoozing. The horses cropped contentedly. Hobart pointedly avoided conversation with Argimanda and Gorvath, fearful lest he should, somehow, get committed to more deeds of derring-do. He snatched some sleep, but as the hours dragged by, he became concerned. The sun was well down when Theiax reappeared, trotting with lolling tongue.

"Horse!" gasped the pussy lion. "Horses, horses all around camp! Parathai horses, Marathai horses, even some horses from Logaia! I reckonize bridles."

"Now what," Hobart asked the clear atmosphere, "would Logaian horses be doing there? Any sign of fighting, Theiax?"

"No; everything is peaceful. People sing in camp."

Hobart sighed with bafflement. "Guess we'll just have to go see for ourselves. Hey, everybody, mount! When we get near the tent city, stand by to run if they act hostile."

They had to skirt several herds of stock whose herdsmen waved languidly to them. There was certainly no sign of blood and tumult here. As Theiax had described, there were horses all around the camp, pegged out in orderly rows.

As they threaded their way among the herds, Hobart recognized one of the royal Logaian grooms. "Hi!" he called. "What are you doing here, Glaukon?"

"I don't know, lord," responded the youth. "I came with King Gordius as I was told to, that's all."

Hobart continued toward the main gate at the head of his party. As he approached it he must have been sighted, for there were trumpet blasts from within. The singing and other sounds of revelry within ceased, and out from the gate boiled a crowd of people on foot.

Hobart tightened his grip on the reins, prepared to whirl his animal around on its haunches; but the people were evidently not hostile. In the front rank were four: Sanyesh, King Gordius, ex-General Valangas in Barbarian costume, with short, blond fuzz sprouting from his scalp, and a very old Barbarian who limped forward on a stick. They were flanked and followed by assorted retainers and standard bearers. Then what Hobart feared worse than a fight came to pass: the four dignitaries with one voice bellowed: "Hail, Rollin, king of kings!"

Hobart had a chance of perhaps five seconds to bolt, but he lost it while making up his mind. Then they were all around him, Argimanda in her father's arms, the others fairly hauling him off his horse.

When the tumult of acclaim died, King Gordius wrung Hobart's hand, explaining: "I knew you'd save her, my boy! And since you're now King of all Logaia, and Sham of the Paratha, Sham Khovind—this is he,"—he indicated the old man on the stick—"Sham Khovind and his son agree that the only sensible thing to do is to make you king of kings, Sham Shamzen, over all three realms!"

"But," wailed Hobart, "I don't *want* to be king of kings—"

"Nonsense, so! You're just the man for it!" The king took Hobart's arm and began to walk him through the gate. "You see, we could never manage it before, because the Marathai wouldn't accept a Parathaian or Logaian ruler; a Logaian wouldn't take a Parathian or Marathaian, and so on, heh, heh. But you're neither one thing nor the other: a stranger with Barbarian hair and civilized manners; as my son Alaxius rudely put it, an impossible person, wearing clothes of a nonexistent color, and a puissant hero to boot. You're the one man who can take charge of our countries, stop these silly internal wars, and make one mighty realm out of them!"

Sham Khovind added in a guttural voice: "We

can make it beeger than just the three keengdoms, Sham Shamzen; we can conquer the wild Theoiri—"

"And," Gordius broke in, "I'm sure Psythoris will join us if invited—"

"And eef they do not, we take them, anyway—"

"And we really should seize the golden city of Plakh; it controls the trade routes to Gan Zheng—"

"And we need the Buryonoi Mountains, for a—how you say eet—strategic frontier—"

Hobart heard in thin-lipped silence. When they reached the Sham's tent, he asked with quiet grimness: "While you men plan how I can conquer the whole planet, will you excuse me? I want to be alone for a while."

Of course, they clamored, he could be alone as long as he wished; he was king of kings, and what he said went. Hobart retreated to one of the smaller compartments which he had used as sleeping quarters the night after the battle. He grasped the rodent skull and called for Kai.

The yellow man popped into view, glancing about nervously at the sounds of celebration that filtered through the tent walls. His bare hide bore a score of large, red lumps.

"Hornets get you?" asked Hobart sympathetically. "Too bad, old boy; can't you cure 'em by magic?"

Kai spread his hands helplessly. "I buy spell from magic peddler; does not work. Peddlers always cheat us poor fish-eaters. Can you stop them, Sham Shamzen?"

"Maybe. I see you've kept up with the news. Look, when you do that disappearing act, can you take somebody else with you?"

"Sure; you take me by the hand, I pull you along, *foosh-whush.*"

"O. K. Know where Nois hangs out?"

"You mean Baaa, master of all?"

"Nois or Zhav or Baaa, whichever you prefer."

"I know," said Kai, apprehension growing on his dish face.

"Well, I want you to take me there. Now!"

Kai was seized with violent trembling, and sank to his knees. "Oh, Sham Shamzen Shamzen! I am afraid! Baaa is lord of everything! Very powerful! Why you want to see him?" he wailed.

"He's been up to some more tricks, and I don't like it. He and I are going to the mat. Come on, give me your hand!" As Kai continued to ululate his fears, Hobart snatched one dirty hand and shook the savage roughly. "Get going!" he roared.

"Y-you take care of my poor people when I am gone?"

"Yes! Damn it, get—" At this instant Kai dissolved into dusty opaqueness; Hobart felt a violent tug on the hand he held. He gripped it more tightly, and felt himself pulled along; through he knew not what. Everything was roaring confusion.

"Here we are," squeaked Kai. The surroundings crystallized into shape, and Hobart gasped.

They were standing in a huge bowl of sleek black rock, miles across. There were no steps or other irregularities in the sides of the bowl; Hobart did not see how anyone, having once slid into the depression, could get out with neither wings nor magic.

The floor of the bowl was circular and flat; they stood at its edge, where the obsidianlike rock began to curve up. In the center of the floor, which was perhaps half a mile across, rose a great, white pyramid, unnaturally bright, since the rays of the evening sun slanted across the bowl above the pyramid's apex.

XV.

"That is it," said Kai, pointing superfluously. "I go now, quick. Will you give me the skull? Will not work for you any more."

Hobart handed over the necklace. Kai said: "Good-by, Sham Shamzen Shamzen Shamzen. You are great man; you do not need me any more. But remember your promise to protect poor fish-eaters. If you want me, I shall be with my people at Lake Nithrid." And the medicine man was gone.

Hobart turned toward the pyramid, wishing he had remembered to bring his musket. There was no substitute for the confidence conferred by possession of a loaded gun, even a muzzle-loading matchlock.

The sun dipped below the edge of the bowl, and the skylight went out with a rush. Hobart was standing in star-spangled blackness, facing the pyramid, which sprang into vivid luminescence, glowing with a cold, ghostly white light. He hesitated for a second, then walked firmly toward it.

It grew larger and larger until it towered over him. He stopped and shouted: "Hey!" After a pause he added: "Does Nois live here?"

An entrance appeared silently in the white surface, in which stood a tall, majestic old man who intoned: "What dost thou seek, Rollin Hobart?"

"I'm looking for the big boss, if you don't mind. You him?"

"Nay; I am but a servitor of our lord, Psylleus by name. Dost know what that which thou askest implieth?"

"No, but I want to see Nois, anyway. They told me anybody could."

"Very well, if thou hast duly considered—"

"Skip it," snapped Hobart irritably. "This thing has gone far enough, and it's cold out here. Does this Nois of yours really exist?"

Psylleus' brows went up. "Of course! The most perfect being necessarily exists; Nois is the most perfect being; therefore Nois exists. Q. E. D."

Hobart waved a weary hand. "Lead on, Aristotle."

The priest bowed and motioned Hobart in. It was hard to make out the features of the interior because of the ubiquitous dead-white glow. There seemed to be passages—Hobart almost ran into a wall at a turn—and then they were out in a lofty chamber. As Hobart's eyes accustomed themselves to his surroundings, he made out another, smaller, pyramid—of the step kind—in the middle of the chamber. Instead of a sharp apex it was crowned by a glowing white chair of stiff, straight lines. In the chair sat a dimly seen white-robed figure.

"He has come," boomed Psylleus.

"Ah," replied a voice from the top of the pyramid. It was a strong voice, but very old and a bit creaky. "Stand forth, Rollin Hobart. Why dost thou seek me?"

Hobart said boldly: "I've been told that you had a hand in some of the things that have happened to me during the past couple of weeks."

"Ah. That may be. But first the questions, then the audience."

"What questions?"

"Didst not know? All who seek me must answer three questions, or, failing, render up their souls that their Nois may continue."

"Hey, I thought anybody could see you—"

"So they may, but nothing is said about leaving my presence afterward, ha, ha."

"What happens to 'em if they don't answereth?"

"They are placed below the throne on which I sit."

"You mean inside that pyramid?"

"Exactly, Rollin Hobart."

"What then?"

"Then? Why, they cease to exist as separate entities."

This was all sufficiently ominous, if vague, to make Hobart sweat. He continued impatiently: "Now look here, Mr. Nois—"

"Ah, Rollin Hobart, the questions! Nay, think not of escape, nor wish for thy musket; both thoughts are futile, and thou wilt need thy brain for more constructive enterprise. Art ready?"

"Art," snapped Hobart. Just let them try to stick him into the electric oven or whatever was under the throne of Nois!

"Question the first: If everything is in space, as is generally believed, then space itself must be in space; and the space wherein the space is must also be in space, and so on to infinity. But this is absurd, for there is but one space by definition. How explainest thou this paradox?"

Hobart knitted his brows, then grinned in the ghastly light. "Simple, your highness or whatever you like to be called. There's no paradox; only a confusion between two meanings of the little word 'in.' Things are in space in the sense of 'are surrounded by,' but space is in space in the sense of 'is congruent or identical with.' Get it?"

There was a moment of silence from the step-pyramid, then came the voice, lower: "O Rollin, thou hast solved the problem of space, which for centuries hath baffled the wise wits of the world. But the problem of time thou shalt not perchance find so easy.

"Question the second: Before a body in motion can reach a given point, it must needs first traverse half the distance; before it can traverse the half it must first traverse the quarter, and so on to infinity. Hence before it can pass from one point to another, it must needs traverse an infinite number of divisions. But an infinite number of distances cannot be traversed in a finite time. Hence motion is impossible; yet it taketh place every day. How explainest thou this paradox?"

Hobart squared his shoulders. "Say, who sold you that as a hard problem? Who said a distance with an infinite number of divisions is the same as an infinite distance? If you take a finite distance, which is what I suppose you started out with, and divide it into an infinite number of parts, the parts will be infinitely small, so it'll take an infinitely *short* time to pass any one of 'em, so your infinities cancel out."

"I do not quite see, Rollin Hobart—"

"That's because you never took calculus at M. I. T. Anyway, infinities are just mathematical concepts, because nobody ever walked an infinite distance or divided an inch into an infinite number of parts. By the way, these problems sound vaguely familiar. Didn't a Greek philosopher named Zeno think them up?"

There was a stir of the dim white robes. "It is not strange that I should know thy name, Rollin Hobart, but how dost thou know mine?"

"You mean to tell me *you're* Zeno of Elea?"

"I was, before I became Nois. I even visited thy world, the three-value world, in an attempt to find the answers to these questions. I failed, then, but I see that thy world progresseth."

"What do you mean, three-value world?"

"Why, there do be an infinite number of worlds, according to the logic whereon they are built. Know that this is the world of two-valued logic—everything either is or is not something—whereas thy world is the world of three-valued logic—everything is something, or is not something, or is partly something."

"Sounds as if this world were the world of Aristotelian logic," said Hobart.

"Ha, ha, thou wilt be the death of me, Rollin Hobart! Know that shortly after I returned hither and became Nois, we had a learned doctor, one Aristotles by name, who swore to go to your world and teach the inhabitants thereof the true logic, by which he meant that of this world. I

never heard what became of him, but it appeareth that he made his mark."

Hobart asked: "What would a world of one-value logic be like?"

"Monotonous; verily I do not recommend it unto thee. But come; thou hast solved the problem of time; perchance thou mayst not find the problem of motion so easily disposed of, for a truly knotty problem it is. Question the third: Two bodies moving with equal speed traverse equal space in the same time. But when two bodies move with equal speed in opposite direction, the one passeth the other in half the time in which it passeth it when at rest. How solvest thou this paradox, Rollin Hobart?"

Hobart laughed aloud. "Didn't you ever hear of the relativity of motion? Look, the term 'motion' doesn't mean a thing except with respect to something else, which we call the frame of reference—" And Hobart launched into an impassioned ten-minute lecture.

When he ended, the figure replied slowly: "Thou hast solved the problems, Rollin Hobart, as I was sure thou wouldst. My term is passed." And the figure heaved itself out of its throne and tottered down the steps of the pyramid. As it approached, Hobart saw that it was merely an old, old man with a scanty wreath of white chin whiskers.

"Hey," he said, "what are you going to do?"

"Do?" quavered the ancient. "Why, die, of course, and verily it is about time. There is no more need for me, since thou art the Nois-elect."

"What?"

"Certainly, Rollin Hobart; thou hast answered the questions! Is it not simple? Long have I sought thee, for I am utterly weary of my exalted state. When my dust hath been removed, take thou my robe and ascend unto my place. Food thou wilt not need; the soul-stuff of visitors who are unable to answer thy questions will suffice thee. The priests will explain thy power and duties unto thee. And now, farewell. Oh, Psylleus! Come hither!"

Hobart exploded: "I won't do it! I don't want to be a prince or king or emperor, or a god, either! I'll see you all in hell first—"

"Yes, master?" said the priest from the entrance, ignoring Hobart's fist-waving dance of fury.

"I die, good Psylleus," said Nois. "Rollin Hobart hath been the death of me, as I said he would. Take thou good care of him. Farewell!" With

which the little, wizened figure sagged and collapsed to the glowing floor. The white robe settled down over it, lower, lower, until there was no visible space between it and the floor.

Psylleus picked up the robe and shook out a little silvery dust. He held it up for Hobart to don. "Thy robe, Nois," he intoned when Hobart seemed disinclined to slip into it.

"To hell with it!" shrieked Hobart. "I'm not your Nois! Get me out of here; get that guy Hoimon!"

"Thou art the next Nois, lord of all," persisted Psylleus. "Wilt thou not take thy robe and thy throne, that thy servant may prostrate himself in adoration?"

"NO! If you prostrate yourself, I'll give you a boot in the rump! Where's that damned entrance— Ah, here! So long, Whiskers, I'm going!"

"Oh, but my lord!" cried the priest. "Thou canst not leave the pyramid!"

"Why not?"

"Without a Nois, actual or inchoate, verily our world would crumble!"

"Let it." Hobart started for the door again, when Psylleus gave such a pitiful shriek of terror that he stopped. "Well, if you don't want me to go, *you* get Hoimon! If you're such a hot high priest, you ought to be able to locate one skinny ascetic!"

"Very good, very good," babbled the priest. "It shall be as my lord wisheth. Oh, Chidelas!"

"Coming," rumbled a sleepy voice. Presently a short, fat priest, younger than the other, appeared. "I was just getting to sleep—goodness gracious, is this now our Nois-elect?"

"It is."

"Why doth he not ascend his throne?"

"I know not," muttered Psylleus. "It is against all precedent. Go thou, Chidelas, and seek Hoimon the ascetic, for our lord desireth his presence forthwith."

"Yeah, and I mean damn quick," snarled Hobart.

Chidelas protested: "If my lord will take his high seat, he can summon Hoimon himself!"

"Yeah? Could I leave the throne once I'd sat in it?"

"Well . . . uh—" hesitated Psylleus, "thou wouldst not wish to leave, verily—"

"Ha! Thought there was a catch! We'll do it the hard way; one of you will go fetch Hoimon, right now!"

The fat priest went out, shaking his head. Hobart sat down on the floor wearily, and said: "You might get me some grub, Psylleus."

"Dost thou mean the larva of an insect?"

"No, I mean food!"

"If my lord will but ascend—"

"YEEOW! I won't ascend your damned throne, and that's that! I'd rather sit in an electric chair with a lunatic fooling around the switch! And when I say food I mean food!"

Psylleus scuttled out, and returned in a little while with a loaf of bread, a lump of cheese, a pot of jam, and a bottle of wine. Hobart relaxed a little. "Nothing funny about this food, is there? I'd put an awful curse on you if there were. Here, sit down; make yourself comfortable."

After the meal, Hobart had nothing to do but wait. It would be easier if he could just sit on the lowest step of the throne pyramid—but, no, he was as near the infernal thing now as he wanted to be. After a while he got sleepy; despite the omnipresent light he stretched out on the floor and dropped off.

When he awakened, undivinely stiff and sore, he was relieved to find that the devout Psylleus had not carried him up the step pyramid while he was asleep. Day was breaking—or exploding, which would better describe its action in the two-value world. The big pyramid was translucent; despite the glow of the white material, Hobart could follow the motion of the sun through the walls. Was it an optical illusion, or was the sun rising at an abnormal rate?

Psylleus appeared with breakfast, at which the sun immediately halted its swoop zenithward. Hobart ate, and when he relaxed afterward, the sun started its dizzy soar again.

"Psylleus!" he called. The sun stopped.

"Yea, lord?" the priest stuck his head out of the entrance, plate and dish rag in hand.

"Am I seeing things, or can I stop the sun by speaking, the way that fellow Joshua did?"

"The sun hath pursued its wonted course, lord."

Hobart scratched his head, and explained the phenomenon in more detail.

"Oh," said Psylleus. "My lord forgetteth that when he but thinketh his own vast thoughts, time passeth for him at a far greater rate than for us humble mortals, so that a thousand days are to him as one."

That explained how Zeno, the former Nois, had lasted so well since the Fifth Century B. C. It also suggested that there would be no particular advantage to such an existence, even from the point of view of longevity, since the Nois would not have the consciousness of any more elapsed time of life than an ordinary person. On the other hand, it was an excellent preventive of boredom, for the day whizzed past before Hobart had a chance to fidget—much. He was still worried; this time phenomenon made things look as though he had already acquired some godlike powers, which of all things he wished to eschew.

The day whizzed past; so did the next, during which Hobart did not budge from his place on the

floor of the temple. The merest suggestion from Psylleus that his lord might find it more comfortable—brought an explosion of temper from Hobart, who instantly suspected sinister motives.

On the third day the fat priest, Chidelas, returned, and after him trudged a gaunt, half-naked figure at whose sight Hobart's heart jumped. "Hoimon!" he shouted, and sprang forward to pump the ascetic's horny hand.

Hoimon started back with a scandalized expression. "My lord! It is not seemly that Nois-elect should fraternize so familiarly with a humble ascetic!"

"To hell with that! And to hell with the Nois business. Have you any idea what you got me into when you snatched me from good, old New York? Have you heard the things they've done to me?"

"Rumors have come to me, O Nois-to-be," admitted Hoimon, a slight twinkle in his frosty, blue eyes. "It seems to your humble disciple that the people of this world have tendered you a degree of recognition of your virtues that were denied you in your own."

"Yeah, that's what they think. But all *I* want is to get back. I don't like it here; I don't fit; and, finally, I won't stay. And *you're* going to take me back through that tunnel!"

The ascetic sighed gustily. "'Tis true, you do not fit, O Nois-elect. For look you: You went to great trouble and risk to carry out obligations that you had incurred, which would lead one to think you a man of honor. Yet in several minor matters you displayed a carelessness with promises and with the strict truth that are inconsistent with truly honorable behavior. In short you are neither good nor bad, pure nor depraved, honorable nor dishonorable, but something between. That is a type of person which simply does not exist in this world."

"I know it!" cried Hobart. "That's one of the things I can't stand about this world!"

Hoimon smiled. "You are consistent in one respect only, and that is your stubbornness. But I fear that I cannot assist you in your determination to return to the three-value world."

"Why not?" squawked Hobart. "Is the tunnel blocked, or what?"

"Not at all, O lord. But know you not that our world would crumble without a Nois? I could not bring such a disaster on its innocent inhabitants!"

"Even if I order you to, as Lord High Boojum?"

"Not even then. Slay me, if you will, or feed me to your soul furnace; it will be all the same."

"I can just plain walk out of here and let it crumble. Damn it all, that's what I'll do, too!"

"The result would be the same, but I should not be responsible." Hoimon folded his skinny arms, obviously prepared to endure the worst.

Hobart pondered, then his eye lit up. He said insinuatingly: "Tell me something about my new job. Can I get up there on the throne and pass miracles?"

"The powers of the office are unlimited, at least as regards this universe, O lord."

"Can I say anything I want, and have it so?"

"Yes, so long as you do not limit the powers of Nois."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you could not say that something shall be so forever more. If it were so, your successors could not change it, and you would have limited the powers of the office of Nois, which by definition are unlimited."

"But look, Hoimon, either I'm Nois or I'm not, to use your own screwy logic; so if Nois is omnipotent, then I must be omnipotent—"

The ascetic interrupted: "Entreating my lord's pardon, I do not understand these fine points of philosophy. I merely seek spiritual perfection in my humble way."

"Hm-m-m. What do you value most?"

"My spiritual perfection," answered Hoimon promptly. "Neither death nor torment can touch that!"

"I don't want to be hard on you, old man," grinned Hobart. "But, after all, you're responsible for getting me into this. Tell you what. Either you take me home and let the priesthood worry about getting another Nois, or I'll get up on that throne and turn you into the most lecherous old libertine this Aristotelian world has ever seen! You'll have a raging thirst for firewater; you'll drool—"

Swift horror flooded the ascetic's face; his composure was not only cracked, but shattered. "Not that!" he cried. "I hear and obey, O Nois-elect! You are too strong for me!"

"That's better," said Hobart. "Now—guess we'll have to make a dash for it."

"I will conduct you," groaned Hoimon, broad shoulders drooping. "But I shall have to prepare the way whilst you remain here, so that the people shall have time to settle their affairs. I go" And the ascetic, loin-towel sagging, hastened out.

XVI.

More days passed, mercifully swift, while Hobart waited. A hundred times a day he told himself that it was all set now, and a hundred times a day reminded himself that there would be a catch in it somewhere.

When Chidelas announced the return of Hoimon, Hobart flung a hasty farewell at the priests, notwithstanding their final wail of protest. "Come on!" he barked, catching Hoimon's elbow and dragging the ascetic along.

As soon as they emerged from the pyramid, the bright sun was blotted out by gray mist that

sprang up from nowhere and turned everything the color of damp blotting paper, and made all outlines fuzzy at twenty feet.

"It is the interregnum," moaned Hoimon. "When the laws of nature are void, and things neither are nor are not!"

"Doesn't bother me," grinned Hobart. "I only hope you don't lose your way in the fog."

They walked swiftly to the edge of the floor of the bowl, and began to climb the curving wall. At first it was easy; then the slope became too steep for comfortable negotiation. Hobart's shod feet skidded on the obsidian, though Hoimon's bare ones continued to make progress.

Then another factor entered the picture; the rock under the pressure of Hobart's feet began to spall and chip off. While he made a couple of bad slips, losing ground each time, the resulting unevenness of the surface provided traction.

"You see, O Rollin," groaned Hoimon, "it is beginning."

"The crumbling?"

Hoimon nodded somberly, and gave Hobart a hand up the last few feet. On the rim of the bowl were standing two animals: a horse and a donkey. The horse was indicated as Hobart's mount, while Hoimon took the ass. "More in keeping with my humility," explained the ascetic. Hobart's saddle included a pair of holsters in which were stuck two matchlock pistols.

"Come," said Hoimon, clucking to his mount.

The little animal started off with negligible urging; Hoimon seemed to have a way with animals. They skirted the rims of a succession of bowls like that which contained the temple. As they rode, the evidence of pitting of the smooth, black surfaces became more and more obvious. When these people spoke of their world's crumbling, they meant crumbling!

The riders came out on another savannah, and pushed their mounts hard, Hoimon apparently steering by instinct. They passed a peasant's hut, briefly visible in the grayness, which had just collapsed into a heap of rubbish. The peasant and his family were standing in a row in front of it and cursing with verve.

Hobart shouted: "Won't the houses in the big cities collapse?"

"Aye," retorted Hoimon. "What suppose you I was doing whilst you awaited me? I spread word to abandon all cities, so that the people might survive the plague of rot until by some miracle another Nois be found! Hold, not so fast; here are the Conical Mountains."

"So soon?" asked Hobart.

"It was not far."

As far as Hobart could see, the sharp, uniform cones had begun to slump and slide, too, so that they looked almost like real mountains. When the riders entered the defiles between the cones, their animals sank up to the hocks in soft, crumbly debris.

"Hasten!" shouted Hoimon, "ere the tunnels collapse!"

The agonizing journey went on and on; Hobart chewed his lips until they bled, and hoped to Nois that Hoimon knew where he was going.

"Off!" bellowed the ascetic, suiting the action to the word. "Bring your pistols, if they have not rusted away!"

Hobart snatched them out; the barrels showed a film of red rust, but they looked as if they would still shoot. "What are they for?" he shouted after Hoimon, who was already leaping up the switchback trail that led to the tunnel opening.

"The cave-folk," Hoimon flung back. "They may be so maddened by the fall of rock that they will attack even me, who has lived among them! And the worst of it is that I shall have to defend myself from them—offer violence to living creatures!"

Hobart struggled up the hill until his heart was going like a Tommy-gun and each breath was agony. At the cave entrance he could barely stagger, and felt like flinging himself prone and letting the world crumble away. But Hoimon barked: "Your flame device, O Rollin! Quickly!"

Hobart snapped the cigarette lighter open. Hoimon lit a torch he had placed in readiness at the cave entrance, and then the matches of the pistols. "Come!" he shouted again.

Hobart staggered after him, gasping deeply through his open mouth. As he entered the darkness he could hear faint rumblings; little bits of the tunnel roof dropped on him and got in his hair. He almost had to run, tall as he was, to keep up with Hoimon's gigantic strides. A grinding thump behind told of a larger fall from the roof.

Hoimon suddenly halted, the torch throwing twisted shadows. He held up a warning finger. Hobart heard again that shrill, inhuman cry; he was sure that all his hair was standing straight on end. The warbling shriek came closer, and something moved in the corridor ahead.

It was so much worse than anything Hobart had anticipated that the engineer came close to passing out. It was manlike, but dead-white and eyeless and covered with long, sparse, tactile hairs like cats' whiskers. It exposed its fangs, repeated its unearthly scream, and ran toward them with long arms reaching.

Hobart thrust one pistol past Hoimon and pulled the trigger. The flash blinded him and the roar brought down a cascade of fragments from the roof, but when his vision cleared he saw that the thing was lying supine and still.

Hoimon cleared the body of the cave-man in one great bound; Hobart struggled after, and then they halted as the whole tunnel was blocked by

the white things. Hobart fired the other pistol, handed it wordlessly to Hoimon, drew his sword, and plunged ahead.

He cut down one, then another; then they were all around him, and something fastened its teeth in his leg— He hacked and thrust in a frenzy, and heard the hard breathing of Hoimon behind him and the *thump, thump* of Hoimon's pistol butt on white skulls. Hoimon shot that wonderful extensible arm past Hobart and knocked over a couple facing him, while through the engineer's head ran an inane little syllogism:

Cave-dwelling organisms—cave-shrimps, cave-salamanders, et cetera—are white and blind.

These cave-folks are genuine cave-dwellers.

Therefore these cave-folk are white and blind.

Something shot past Hobart's head with an audible swish: the body of a cave-man, which crashed into the crowd in front, mowing them down like a cannon ball. Hoimon dashed past him, swinging the pistol by the barrel and still holding the torch; then halted and backed, almost stepping on Hobart. He called over his shoulder: "Back! The tunnel col—" The rest was drowned in a deep, grinding roar; in the dim torchlight Hobart could see, down the tunnel ahead, masses of rock moving, pouring into the corridor, and then thick dust billowing toward them. The footing shook, and the two human beings took to their heels.

Behind them came the shrieks of more cave-men, pouring into the uncollapsed part of the tunnel from some obscure side entrance. Hobart heard their feet pattering, and swung his sword blindly behind him as he ran. He was rewarded by hitting something and hearing a scream. The little gray spot that was the outer world seemed to get no nearer; then it expanded suddenly. Both men went straight down the mountainside in long, slithering leaps. Hoimon had finally lost his towel, and was bleeding from a dozen bites and scratches.

Hobart asked: "Will they follow—"

"There is no sun to stop them," answered Hoimon, mounting his ass. Hobart sheathed his sword and swung atop his horse just as the pallid horde poured out of the tunnel mouth and spilled down the slope like popcorn.

The animals hurried off without urging, and were immediately out of sight of the ghastly tribesmen. But the thin, piercing screams followed after and did not grow appreciably fainter.

"Are they coming after us?" asked Hobart.

"Yes, by scent. When we get out of the Conical Mountains we can outrun them."

"Hey, Hoimon, if the tunnels have collapsed, how'll I get back to my world?"

"You cannot, my friend."

"Isn't there any other place—"

"Not that I know; the tunnel end is the only point where the barrier is thin enough for my spiritual perfection to penetrate. We must return to the pyramid of Nois."

"What? I'll be damned if—"

"You have no choice, O Rollin. Know that you alone can end the interregnum and bring back the sun. Until you do, the cave-folk will pursue us across half the world, if need be. It will probably not be necessary, for they can run down the swiftest horse in time. Now save your breath, for we come to the open land."

After several briskly running miles, they passed the collapsed peasant's hut. It occurred to Hobart that the cave-folk would not be too nicely discriminating in their appetite. He pulled up and shouted to the peasant: "Run for your lives! The cave-men are coming!"

The man stared at him stupidly. Hoimon remarked: "They can never escape afoot, O Rollin. The cave-folk will hunt them down by scent and devour them, as they will many another unless thwarted."

"How far to the pyramid?" snapped Hobart.

"Perhaps two miles more."

"O. K., we'll give these folks the animals. Get off!" Hobart dismounted and repeated his warning with more detail. Thin shrieks wafting through the fog carried conviction, and the family mounted with stammering thanks and rode off.

Hobart went through the pockets of the jacket of his conservative brown business suit—now a much wrinkled, stained, and faded garment—and discarded the coat itself and his necktie. Then he set out at an easy long-distance stride, gripping his scabbard in his left fist. Hoimon trotted beside him.

The ululation of the cave-men came faintly for a long time. Then they waxed little by little. Hobart and Hoimon exchanged glances, but they said nothing, saving their wind. Hobart was pretty tired from his previous exertions, but had some miles of running left in his legs if he were not forced to sprint.

The cries were a lot louder when they reached the area of the black rock bowls. Hoimon led the way, trotting around arc after arc. In one glimpse back Hobart could barely make out a crowd of little figures moving in the grayness behind them.

He was debating whether to throw away his sword when they arrived at the bowl containing the glowing white pyramid, one definite thing in that world of half-light. Hoimon ran right down the side with enormous strides. Hobart took four such leaps and turned his ankle and finished the slope rolling over and over with the scabbard banging his shins and prodding his ribs. He stopped rolling almost at the bottom and tried to get up, but the outraged foot would not support

him. Screams drew his regard up; the cave-men appeared on the rim of the bowl.

Hoimon picked Rollin Hobart up, tucked him under one arm, and trotted heavily to the pyramid. Hobart was inside in the presence of Psylleus and Chidelas before he knew it.

The two priests and the ascetic shouted at him all at once: "Quickly, lord, ascend thy throne! Else the cave-folk will do us to shameful death!"

"But they can't come in *here*—" protested Hobart.

"Aye, but they can!" replied Hoimon. "Whilst the throne is vacant, this is but a pyramid of curious luminous rock, no more! Hasten!"

With a silent curse, Hobart snatched the robe that Psylleus proffered, and hobbled up the steps of the throne. With each step the ascent became easier; he made the last two in one leap, and jumped into the square, uncomfortable-looking seat as if he were playing musical chairs.

At once the grayness outside vanished; the fog whirled away—Hobart did not know how he could see it do so, but he could—and the sun burst out bright and glorious. The cave-men crowding outside burst into chattering squeaks of dismay.

Hobart shouted: "Let the cave-folk be immobilized in their present positions until I decide what to do with them!" At once the squeaks ceased; the pyramid was ringed by white, eyeless, fanged statues.

Hm-m-m, not so bad, being Nois! Hobart leaned back, finding to his surprise that the throne was perfectly comfortable. There was a lack of bodily sensation, as when one is floating in a saline bath at just body temperature. The pain in his ankle faded away, and the ache in his overtaxed lungs disappeared.

Down on the floor below, three figures, two white-robed and one clothed in nothing but holy dirt, prostrated themselves in adoration.

Hobart relaxed for a full minute, enjoying the sensation. Then he tensed himself again. He called: "Let there be a new and adequate set of cages in the Royal Zoological Gardens of the City of Oroloia! Let the cave-folk, restored to their normal activity, be placed therein! All right, you guys down there, get up! You embarrass me. And I've played god all I'm gonna. *Ugh!*"

Hobart had tried to rise from his seat, and had found to his consternation that he could not. He braced his muscles and heaved. "*Unh!*" he grunted, but still could not rise.

"Hey!" he called to his worshipers. "What's the idea? I want to leave!"

"O lord," murmured Psylleus, oozing reverence, "verily thou canst not leave until thy successor is at hand, for to do so would be to lower the dignity of thy office, which is eternal! Thy servants know of no way to release thee."

"Oh, yeah?" Hobart pondered blackly for a few seconds. So they thought they had him at last, eh? He called: "Hoimon!"

"Yea, lord?"

"How'd you like to be Nois?"

"Ow!" yelled Hoimon in sudden anguish. "Spare your servant, O Nois! What would become of my humility, my self-abasement? What of my spiritual perfection? For, lo, these many years have I striven to erase all personal desires, to abandon all material pleasures; To me, the occupation of such a lofty seat would be the worst fate imaginable! Destroy me, if you will, or transmute me to the vilest of hedonists: that is one thing I cannot, will not do! And now, if my lord pleases, I go to resume my solitary life of service and humility, free of all joys save those of the spirit!"

Hobart grinned: "Well, if you want misery, and being Nois is the worst thing you can think of, it's just the ticket for you! Hey, *come back here!*" Hoimon cowered back to the foot of the throne. Hobart continued:

"This is going to be a dirty trick in a way, but, after all, you started it." He filled his lungs and cried: "When I say 'bang,' let the following things be accomplished: First, that all the damage done during the recent crumbling of this world shall be repaired. Second: that Hoimon, the ascetic, shall be not only the kind of guy that would make a good Nois, but the kind that would be glad to take the job. Third: that the said Hoimon, otherwise known as the party of the first part, shall be Nois, in the throne and everything. Lastly: that I, the present Nois, shall be just plain Rollin Hobart again, and back in my own apartment in New York City, in the three-value world!

BANG!"

He was standing in his own living room.

He ran his eyes hungrily over every detail, and almost cried at the sight of his old textbooks and other unglamorous, but highly individual, possessions.

He stepped to the door, wincing as he realized that he had a sprained ankle again, and looked cautiously out through the crack. No rock tunnel; just the good, old apartment-house corridor—

He unbuckled his sword—nice souvenir—and lowered himself into his big armchair. He pulled up the left leg of his shabby brown pants. The cave-man's bite had left a double row of blue-black bruises, but the teeth had not actually pierced the skin, which was a blessing. His right leg deserved more attention; he pulled off his shoe and then the sock, whose pattern was stretched all out of shape by the swelling of the ankle. He could move the foot a little without pain, so the sprain was not as bad as he had thought at the time. But he'd

been stupid not to fix those injuries while he was Nois—

He reached over to his battered smoking stand and got out a cigar. Nois, it felt good to relax!

Perhaps half the cigar had gone up in smoke when a sound from the kitchenette made Hobart prick his ears. He had thought he heard movement before, but dismissed the idea as imagination. Now, however, came a definite sound: the *shlink, shlink* of a cocktail shaker. Who the devil would be mixing drinks in his apartment?

"George?" he called. "Say, George, remember my saying you couldn't even conceive of a world run on Aristotelian logic? Well, I was wrong. I've just been there, and it's the damnedest thing you—"

The cocktail-mixer appeared, shaker and glasses on a tray. It was the Princess Argimanda, clad, not in a gauzy whatnot, but in Saks' best.

"Ugk," said Hobart. When his wits returned from their vacation, he got out: "Thanks—I can sure use this—you look like a million dol— Say, Argimanda, what are you doing in my apartment anyway?"

She smiled with a trace of mischief. "Hoimon brought me, three days ago. I wanted to see your world, so I prevailed on the old dear to take me through his tunnel. Good heavens, what's the matter with your foot?"

"Turned it. If you could get something full of cold water to soak it in, it'd be just dandy. Oh, yeah, and you'll find some Epsom salts in the bathroom. You dump 'em into the water."

Argimanda departed and presently returned with a stove-pot full of solution. She continued: "So-o-o, your little country girl looked your world over, and decided she'd like to live there. Hoimon said you'd be along in a few days."

"I almost wasn't," said Hobart.

"What happened? Hoimon spoke of danger."

"Ouch!" He lowered his foot. "Tell you some other time; it's a long story and I'm tired."

"Mad?" She looked slantwise up at him.

"N-not exactly—"

She patted his knee. "Don't worry about me, *Mr.* Hobart. I'm moving out right away, to the Y. W. until my job starts."

"Job?"

"Sure thing. I'm a lexicographer, you know, though I had a time convincing them of the fact without any references."

Hobart took another drag on his butt, and said: "You've changed, Argimanda."

"How?"

"Clothes—and slang—and everything; you're actually human!"

"Thanks for the compliment. But I really haven't. It's merely the application of Xyzikeia's first gift to her fairy goddaughter: intelligence."

Hobart shook his head wonderingly. "You know, I'll be kind of helpless for a couple of days, and there won't be anybody to get my meals, and . . . uh—"

"You'd like me to cook them for you?" snapped Argimanda. "Sorry, Rolly, but I shall be busy, I'm afraid. I'll tell the nearest restaurant to send a man up, if you like." She finished her cocktail and set the glass down in a marked manner. "I'm leaving right now." She clicked decisively into the bedroom, and reappeared with a traveling case.

Hobart said anxiously: "Argimanda, you know I've been thinking. Maybe I was . . . uh . . . hasty . . . uh—"

"Rollin Hobart!" said Argimanda dangerously. "I've tried to treat you nicely, because after all you did save my life. But if you're going to offer me another chance, allow me to inform you that I don't accept other chances from gentlemen, including you for the sake of courtesy. I'm doing very nicely, thank you; I've got six dates for the next two weeks already."

"You're actually angry!" he gauped.

"You're jolly well right I'm angry! The very sight of you makes my hot Logaian blood boil. If you want to call me up at the end of a year, look for Argimanda Xerophus in the phone book. I may be able to endure your society by then, if I haven't married a college president or a munitions manufacturer. Good-by!"

"A year! Wait a minute, please," pleaded Hobart. "I know I'm a heel and a stuffed shirt. But I do love you. I don't know for how long, but I suspect from the first time I saw you, though I wouldn't have admitted it. I worship the ground you walk on. All I'll do for the next year is watch the calendar. When the time's up I'll come running to offer the heart and hand, for whatever they're worth, of one self-centered old bachelor. And I'll bring a spanner to use on your college president if necessary."

She sighed. "Well, in that case, Rolly—wouldn't a year be an awful waste of time?"

Then they were in each other's arms, whispering long-withheld endearments.

"Miaow!" It was Theiax, pushing the door open. The social lion cocked an eye at the spectacle, then complacently sat down and began to lap tea out of a cup on the floor.

Argimanda, over Hobart's shoulder, caught the pussy-lion's eye and winked.

Theiax smiled into his mane. He purred: "Prince, you need not worry about my size any more. I have my dignity even if I am small. I just chased biggest dog in New York clear into Hudson River!"

THE END.

ETAOIN SHRDLU

By Fredric Brown

● **The little gentleman from Somewhere wanted to set a special piece of work on the Linotype machine. The machine was never the same afterward. It would work by itself. More, it demanded work—more work—**

Illustrated by Orban

It was rather funny for a while, the business about Ronson's Linotype. But it began to get a bit too sticky for comfort well before the end. And despite the fact that Ronson came out ahead on the deal, I'd have never sent him the little guy with the pimple, if I'd guessed what was going to happen. Fabulous profits or not, poor Ronson got too many gray hairs out of it.

"You're Mr. Walter Merold?" asked the little guy with the pimple. He'd called at the desk of the hotel where I live, and I'd told them to send him on up.

I admitted my identity, and he said, "Glad to know you, Mr. Merold. I'm—" and he gave me his name, but I can't remember now what it was. I'm usually good at remembering names.

I told him I was delighted to meet him and what did he want, and he started to tell me. I interrupted him before he got very far, though.

"Somebody gave you a wrong steer," I told him.

"Yes, I've been a printing technician, but I'm retired. Anyway, do you know that the cost of getting special Linotype mats cut would be awfully high? If it's only one page you want printed with those special characters, you'd do a lot better to have somebody hand-letter it for you and then get a photographic reproduction in zinc."

"But that wouldn't do, Mr. Merold. Not at all. You see, the thing is a secret. Those I represent — But skip that. Anyway, I daren't let anyone see it, as they would have to to make a zinc."

Just another nut, I thought, and looked at him closely.

He didn't look nutty. He was rather ordinary-looking on the whole, although he had a foreign—rather an Asiatic—look about him, somehow, despite the fact that he was blond and fair-skinned. And he had a pimple on his forehead, in dead center just above the bridge of the nose. You've seen ones like it on statues of Buddha, and Orientals call it the pimple of wisdom and it's something special.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well," I pointed out, "you can't have the matrices cut for Linotype work without letting somebody see the characters you want on them, can you? And whoever runs the machine will also see—"

"Oh, but I'll do that myself," said the little guy with the pimple. (Ronson and I later called him the L. G. W. T. P., which stands for "little guy with the pimple," because Ronson couldn't remember his name, either, but I'm getting ahead of my story. "Certainly the cutter will see them, but he'll see them as individual characters, and that won't matter. Then the actual setting of the type on the Linotype I can do myself. Someone can show me how to run one enough for me to set up one page—just a score of lines, really. And it doesn't have to be printed, here. Just the type is all I'll want. I don't care what it costs me."

"O. K.," I said. "I'll send you to the proper man at Mergenthaler, the Linotype people. They'll cut your mats. Then, if you want privacy and access to a Linotype, go see George Ronson. He runs a little country biweekly right here in town. For a fair price, he'll turn his shop over to you for long enough for you to set your type."

And that was that. Two weeks later, George Ronson and I went fishing on a Tuesday morning while the L. G. W. T. P. used George's Linotype to assemble the weird-looking mats he'd just received by air express from Mergenthaler. George had, the afternoon before, showed the little guy how to run the Linotype.

We caught a dozen fish apiece, and I remember that Ronson chuckled and said that made thirteen fish for him because the L. G. W. T. P. was paying him fifty bucks cash money just for one morning's use of his shop.

And everything was in order when we got back except that George had to pick brass out of the hellbox because the L. G. W. T. P. had smashed his new brass matrices when he'd finished with them, and hadn't known that one shouldn't throw brass in with the type metal that gets melted over again.

The next time I saw George was after his Saturday edition was off the press. I immediately took him to task.

"Listen," I said, "that stuff about misspelling words and using bum grammar on purpose isn't funny any more. Not even in a country newspaper. Were you by any chance trying to make your news letters from the surrounding towns sound authentic by following copy out the window, or what?"

Ronson looked at me kind of funny and said, "Well—yes."

"Yes, what?" I wanted to know. "You mean you were deliberately trying to be funny, or following copy out the—"

He said, "Come on around and I'll show you."

"Show me what?"

"What I'm going to show you," he said, not very lucidly. "You can still set type, can't you?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Come on, then," he said firmly. "You're a Linotype technician, and besides you got me into this."

"Into what?"

"Into this," he said, and wouldn't tell me a thing more until we got there. Then he rummaged in the pigeonholes of his desk and pulled out a piece of dead copy and gave it to me.

His face had a kind of wistful look. "Walter," he said, "maybe I'm nuts, and I want to find out. I guess running a local paper for twenty-two years and doing all the work myself and trying to please everybody is enough to get a man off his rocker, but I want to find out."

I looked at him, and I looked at the copy sheet he'd handed to me. It was just an ordinary sheet of foolscap and it was in handwriting that I recognized as that of Hank Rogg, the hardware merchant over at Hales Corners who sends in items from there. There were the usual misspellings one would expect from Hank, but the item itself wasn't news to me. It read: "The weding of H. M. Klaflin and Miss Margorie Burke took place yesterday evening at the home of the bride. The bridesmades were—"

I quit reading and looked up at George and wondered what he was getting at. I said, "So what? This was two days ago, and I attended the wedding myself. There's nothing funny about—"

"Listen, Walter," he said, "set that for me, will you? Go over and sit down at the Linotype and set that whole thing. It won't run over ten or twelve lines."

"Sure, but why?"

"Because— Well, just set it, Walter. Then I'll tell you why."

So I went out in the shop and sat down at the Linotype, and I ran a couple of pi lines to get the feel of the keyboard again, and then I put the copy on the clipboard and started. I said, "Hey, George, Marjorie spells her name with a j, doesn't she, instead of a g?"

And George said, "Yeah," in a funny tone of voice.

I ran off the rest of the squib, and then looked up and said, "Well?"

He came across and lifted the stick out of the machine and read the slugs upside down like all printers read type, and he sighed. He said, "Then it wasn't me. Lookit, Walter."

He handed me the stick, and I read the type, or started to.

It read, "The weding of H. M. Klaflin and Miss Margorie Burke took place yesterday evening at the home of the bride. The bridesmades were—"

I grinned. "Good thing I don't have to set type for a living any more, George. I'm slipping; three errors in the first five lines. But what about it? Now tell me why you wanted me to set it."

He said, "Set the first couple lines over again, Walter. I . . . I want you to find out for yourself."

I looked up at him and he looked so darned serious and worried that I didn't argue. I turned back to the keyboard and started out again: "The wedding of—" My eyes went up to the assembly slide and read the characters on the front of the mats that had dropped, and I saw that it read, "The weding of—"

There's one advantage about a Linotype you may not know if you're not a printer. You can always make a correction in a line if you make it before you push the lever that sends in the line of matrices to cast the slug. You just drop the mats you need for the correction and put them in the right place by hand.

So I pushed the d key to get another d matrix to correct the misspelled word "weding"—and nothing happened. The keyboard cam was going around all right and the click sounded O. K., but no d mat dropped. I looked up top to see if there was a distributor stop and there wasn't.

I stood up. "The d channel's jammed," I said. To be sure before I started to work on it, I held the d key down a minute and listened to the series of clicks while the keyboard cam went round.

But no d matrix dropped, so I reached for the—

"Skip it, Walter," said George Ronson quietly. "Send in the line and keep on going."

I sat down again and decided to humor him. If I did, I'd probably find out what he was leading up to quicker than if I argued. I finished the first line and started the second and came to the word "Margorie" on copy. I hit the M key, the a, r, j, o—and happened to glance at the assembly slide. The matrices there read "Margo—"

I said, "Damn" and hit the j key again to get a j mat to substitute for the g, and nothing happened. The j channel must be jammed. I held the j key down and no mat dropped. I said, "Damn," again and stood up to look over the escapement mechanism.

"Never mind, Walter," said George. There was a funny blend of a lot of things in his voice; a sort of triumph over me, I guess; and a bit of fear and a lot of bewilderment and a touch of resignation. "Don't you see? *It follows copy!*"

"It—*what?*"

"That's why I wanted you to try it out, Walter," he said. "Just to make sure it was the machine and not *me*. Lookit; that copy in the clipboard has w-e-d-i-n-g for wedding, and M-a-r-g-o-r-i-e for Marjorie—*and no matter what keys you hit, that's the way the mats drop.*"

I said, "Bosh. George, have you been drinking?"

"Don't believe me," he said. "Keep on trying to set those lines right. Set your correction for the fourth line; the one that has b-r-i-d-e-s-m-a-d-e-s in it."

I grunted, and I looked back at the stick of type to see what word the fourth line started with, and I started hitting keys. I set, "The bridesma" and then I stopped. Slowly and deliberately and looking at the keyboard while I did it, I put my index finger on the i key and pushed. I heard the mat click through the escapement, and I looked up and saw it fall over the star wheel. I knew I hadn't hit the wrong key on that one. The mats in the assembly elevator read—yes, you've guessed it: "bridesmad—"

I said, "I don't believe it."

George Ronson looked at me with a sort of lopsided, worried grin. He said, "Neither did I. Listen, Walter, I'm going out to take a walk. I'm going nuts. I can't stand it here right now. You go ahead and convince yourself. Take your time."

I watched him until he'd gone out the door. Then with a kind of funny feeling, I turned back to the Linotype. It was a long time before I believed it, but it was so.

No matter what keys I hit, the damn machine followed copy, errors and all.

I went the whole hog finally. I started over again, and set the first couple of words and then began to sweep my fingers down the rows of keys in sweeps like an operator uses to fill out a pi line: ETAOIN SHRDLU ETAOIN SHRDLU ETAOIN SHRDLU—and I didn't look at the matrices in the assembler slide. I sent them in to cast, and I picked up the hot slug that the ejector pushed out of the mold and I read: "The weding of H. M. Klaflin and—"

There was sweat on my forehead. I wiped it off

and then I shut off the machine and went out to look for George Ronson. I didn't have to look very hard because he was right where I knew I'd find him. I ordered a drink, too.

He'd taken a look at my face when I walked into the bar, and I guess he didn't have to ask me what had happened.

We touched our glasses together and downed the contents before either of us said anything at all. Then I asked, "Got any idea *why* it works like that?"

He nodded.

I said, "Don't tell me. Wait until I've had a couple more drinks and then maybe I can take it—maybe." I raised my voice and said, "Hey, Joe; just leave that bottle in reach on the bar. We'll settle for it."

He did, and I had two more shots fairly quick. Then I closed my eyes and said, "All right, George, why?"

"Remember that guy who had those special mats cut and rented use of my Linotype to set up something that was too secret for anybody to read? I can't remember his name—what was it?"

I tried to remember, and I couldn't. I had another drink and said, "Call him the L. G. W. T. P."

George wanted to know why and I told him, and he filled his glass again and said, "I got a letter from him."

I said, "That's nice." And I had another drink and said, "Got the letter with you?"

"Huh-uh. I didn't keep it."

I said, "Oh."

Then I had another drink and asked, "Do you remember what it said?"

"Walter, I remember parts of it. Didn't read it cl-closely. I thought the guy was screwy, see? I threw it 'way."

He stopped and had another drink, and finally I got tired waiting and said, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"The letter. What did the part you remember shay?"

"Oh, that," said George. "Yeah. Something about the Lilo . . . Linotl . . . you know what I mean."

By that time the bottle on the bar in front of us couldn't have been the same one, because this one was two-thirds full and the other one had been only one-third full. I took another drink. "What'd he shay about it?"

"Who?"

"Th' L. G. . . . G. P. . . . aw, th' guy who wrote th' letter."

"What letter?" asked George.

I woke up somewhere around noon the next day, and I felt awful. It took me a couple of hours to get bathed and shaved and feeling good enough to go out, but when I did I headed right for George's printing shop.

He was running the press, and he looked almost as bad as I felt. I picked up one of the papers as it came off and looked at it. It's a four-sheet and the inside two are boiler plate, but the first and fourth pages are local stuff.

I read a few items, including one that started off: "The weding of H. M. Klaflin and Miss Margorie—" and I glanced at the silent Linotype back in the corner and from it to George and back to that silent hulk of steel and cast iron.

I had to yell to George to be heard over the noise of the press. "George, listen. About the Lino—" Somehow I couldn't make myself *yell* something that sounded silly, so I compromised. "Did you get it fixed?" I asked.

He shook his head, and shut off the press. "That's the run," he said. "Well, now to get them folded."

"Listen," I said, "the hell with the papers. What I want to know is how you got to press at all. You didn't have half your quota set when I was here yesterday, and after all we drank, I don't see how you did it."

He grinned at me. "Easy," he said. "Try it. All you got to do, drunk or sober, is sit down at that machine and put copy on the clipboard and slide your fingers around on the keys a bit, and it sets the copy. Yes, mistakes and all—but, after this, I'll just correct the errors on copy before I start. This time I was too tight, Walter, and they had to go as was. Walter, I'm beginning to *like* that machine. This is the first time in a year I've got to press exactly on time."

"Yeah," I said, "but—"

"But what?"

"But—" I wanted to say that I still didn't believe it, but I couldn't. After all, I'd tried out that machine yesterday while I'd been cold sober.

I walked over closer and looked at it again. It looked exactly like any other one-magazine model Linotype from where I stood. I knew every cog and spring in it.

"George," I said uneasily, "I got a feeling the damn thing is *looking* at me. Have you felt—"

He nodded. I turned back and looked at the Linotype again, and I was sure this time, and I closed my eyes and felt it even more strongly. You know that feeling you get once in a while, of being stared at? Well, this was stronger. It wasn't exactly an unfriendly stare. Sort of impersonal. It made me feel scared stiff.

"George," I said, "let's get out of here."

"What for?"

"I . . . I want to talk to you, George. And, somehow, I just don't want to talk here."

He looked at me, and then back at the stack of papers he was folding by hand. "You needn't be

afraid, Walter," he said quietly. "It won't hurt you. It's friendly."

"You're—" Well, I started to say "crazy," but if he was, then I was, too, and I stopped. I thought a minute and then said, "George, you started yesterday to tell me what you remembered of the letter you got from . . . from the L. G. W. T. P. What was it?"

"Oh, that. Listen, Walter, will you promise me something? That you'll keep this whole business strictly confidential? I mean, not tell anybody about it?"

"Tell anybody?" I demanded. "And get locked in a booby hatch? Not me. You think anybody would believe me? You think *I* would have believed it myself, if— But what about the letter?"

"You promise?"

"Sure."

"Well," he said, "like I think I told you, the letter was vague and what I remember of it was vaguer. But it explained that he'd used my Linotype to compose a . . . a metaphysical formula. He needed it, set in type, to take back with him."

"Take back where, George?"

"Take back where? He said to— I mean he didn't say where. Just to where he was going back, see? But he said it might have an effect on the machine that composed it, and if it did, he was sorry, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He couldn't tell, because it took a while for the thing to work."

"What thing?"

"Well," said George. "It sounded like a lot of big words to me, and hooey at that." He looked back down at the papers he was folding. "Honest, it sounded so nuts I threw it away. But, thinking back, after what's happened— Well, I remember the word 'pseudolife.' I think it was a formula for giving pseudolife to inanimate objects. He said they used it on their . . . their robots."

"They? Who is 'they'?"

"He didn't say."

I filled my pipe, and lighted it thoughtfully. "George," I said after a while, "you better smash it."

Ronson looked at me, his eyes wide. "Smash it? Walter, you're nuts. Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? Why, there's a fortune in this thing! Do you know how long it took me to set the type for this edition, drunk as I was? About an hour; that's how I got through the press run on time."

I looked at him suspiciously. "Phooey," I said. "Animate or inanimate, that Lino's geared for six lines a minute. That's all she'll go, unless you geared it up to run faster. Maybe to ten lines a minute if you taped the roller. Did you tape—"

"Tape hell," said George. "The thing goes so fast you can't hang the elevator on short-measure pi lines! And, Walter, take a look at the mold—the minion mold. It's in casting position."

A bit reluctantly, I walked back to the Linotype. The motor was humming quietly and again I could have sworn the damn thing was watching me. But I took a grip on my courage and the handles and I lowered my vise to expose the mold wheel. And I saw right away what George meant about the minion mold; it was bright-blue. I don't mean the blue of a gun barrel; I mean a real azure color that I'd never seen metal take before. The other three molds were turning the same shade.

I closed the vise and looked at George.

He said, "I don't know, either, except that that happened after the mold overheated and a slug stuck. I think it's some kind of heat treatment. It can cast a hundred lines a minute now without sticking, and it—"

"Whoa," I said, "back up. You couldn't even feed it metal fast enough to—"

He grinned at me, a scared but triumphant grin. "Walter, look around at the back. I built a hopper over the metal pot. I had to; I ran out of pigs in

wired him when I'd get there. He met me at the airport.

He looked older and worn to a frazzle, and his eyes looked like he hadn't slept for days. But he had on a new suit and he drove a new car that shrieked money by the very silence of its engine.

He said, "ThankGodyou'rebackWalterI'llpayyouanypriceyouwantto—"

"Hey," I said, "slow down; you're talking so fast you don't make sense. Now start over and take it easy. What's the trouble?"

"Nothing's the trouble! Everything's wonderful, Walter. But I got so much job work I can't begin to handle it, see? I been working twenty hours a day myself, because I'm making money so fast it costs me fifty dollars every hour I take off, and I can't afford to take off time at fifty dollars an hour, Walter, and—"

"*Whoa,*" I said. "*Why* can't you afford to take off time? If you're averaging fifty an hour, why not work a ten-hour day and— Holy cow, five hundred dollars a day! What more do you want?"

"Huh? And lose the other five hundred a day! Golly, Walter, this is too good to last. Can't you see that? Something's likely to happen and for the first time in my life I've got a chance to get rich, and you've got to help me, and you can get rich yourself doing it! Lookit, we can each work a twelve-hour shift on Etaoin, and—"

"On what?"

"On Etaoin Shrdlu. I named it, Walter. And I'm farming out the presswork so I can put in all my time setting type. And, listen, we can each work a twelve-hour shift, see? Just for a little while, Walter, till we get rich. I'll . . . I'll cut you in for a one-fourth interest, even if it's my Linotype and my shop. That'll pay you about three hundred dollars a day; two thousand one hundred dollars for a seven-day week! At the typesetting rates I've been quoting, I can get all the work we can—"

"Slow down again," I said. "Quoting whom? There isn't enough printing in Centerville to add up to a tenth that much."

"Not Centerville, Walter. New York. I've been getting work from the big book publishers. Bergstrom, for one; and Hayes & Hayes have thrown me their whole line of reprints, and Wheeler House, and Willet & Clark. See, I contract for the whole thing, and then pay somebody else to do the presswork and binding and just do the typography myself. And I insist on perfect copy, carefully edited. Then whatever alterations there are, I farm out to another typesetter. That's how I got Etaoin Shrdlu licked, Walter. Well, will you?"

"No," I told him.

We'd been driving in from the airport while he talked, and he almost lost control of the wheel when I turned down his proposition. Then he swung off the road and parked, and turned to look at me incredulously.

"Why not, Walter? Over *two thousand dollars a week* for your share? What more do you—"

"George," I told him, "there are a lot of reasons why not, but the main one is that I don't want to. I've retired. I've got enough money to live on. My income is maybe nearer three dollars a day than three hundred, but what would I *do* with three hundred? And I'd ruin my health—like you're doing to yourself—working twelve hours a day, and— Well, nix. I'm satisfied with what I got."

"You must be kidding, Walter. Everybody wants to be rich. And lookit what a couple thousand dollars a week would run to in a couple of years. Over half a million dollars! And you've got two grown sons who could use—"

"They're both doing fine, thanks. Good jobs and their feet on the ladder. If I left 'em fortunes, it would do more harm than good. Anyway, why pick on me? Anybody can set type on a Linotype that sets its own rate of speed and follows copy and can't make an error! Lord, man, you can find people by the hundreds who'd be glad to work for less than three hundred dollars a day. Quite a bit less. If you insist on capitalizing on this thing, hire three operators to work three eight-hour shifts and don't handle anything but the business end yourself. You're getting gray hairs and killing yourself the way you're doing it."

He gestured hopelessly. "I can't, Walter. I can't hire anybody. Don't you see this thing has *got* to be kept a secret! Why, for one thing the unions would clamp down on me so fast that— But you're the only one I can trust, Walter, because you—"

"Because I already know about it?" I grinned at him. "So you've got to trust me, anyway, whether you like it or not. But the answer is still, no. I've retired and you can't tempt me. And my advice is to take a sledge hammer and smash that . . . that *thing*."

"Good Lord, why?"

"Because, dammit, I don't know why. I just would. For one thing if you don't get this avarice out of your system and work normal hours, I bet it will kill you. And, for another, maybe that formula is just starting to work. How do you know how far it will go?"

He sighed, and I could see he hadn't been listening to a word I'd said. "Walter," he pleaded, "I'll give you five hundred a day."

I shook my head firmly. "Not for five thousand, or five hundred thousand."

He must have realized that I meant it, for he started the car again. He said, "Well, I suppose if money really doesn't mean anything to you—"

"Honest, it doesn't," I assured him. "Oh, it

would if I didn't have it. But I've got a regular income and I'm just as happy as if it were ten times that much. Especially if I had to work with . . . with—"

"With Etaoin Shrdlu? Maybe you'd get to like it. Walter, I'll swear the thing is developing a personality. Want to drop around to the shop now?"

"Huh-uh," I said. "I need a bath and sleep. But I'll drop around, all right. Say, last time I saw you I didn't have the chance to ask what you meant by that statement about dross. What do you mean, there isn't any dross?"

He kept his eyes on the road. "Did I say that? I don't remember—"

"Now listen, George, don't try to pull anything like that. You know perfectly well you said it, and that you're dodging now. What's it about? Kick in."

He said, "Well—" and drove a couple of minutes in silence, and then: "Oh, all right. I might as well tell you. I haven't bought any type metal since . . . since it happened. And there's a few more tons of it around than there was then, besides the type I've sent out for presswork. See?"

"No. Unless you mean that it—"

He nodded. "It transmutes, Walter. That second day, when it got so fast I couldn't keep up with pig metal, I found out. I built the hopper over the metal pot, and I got so desperate for new metal I started shoving in unwashed pi type and figured on skimming off the dross after it melted —and there wasn't any dross. The top of the molten metal was as smooth and shiny as . . . as the top of your head, Walter."

"But—" I said. *"How—"*

"I don't know, Walter. But it's something chemical. A sort of gray fluid stuff. Down in the bottom of the metal pot. I saw it. One day when it ran almost empty. Something that works like a gastric juice and digests whatever I put in the hopper into pure type metal."

I ran the back of my hand across my forehead and found that it was wet. I said weakly, "Whatever you put in—"

"Yes, whatever. When I ran out of sweepings and ashes and waste paper, I used—well, just take a look at the size of the hole in the back yard."

Neither of us said anything for a few minutes, until the car pulled up in front of my hotel. Then: "George," I told him, "if you value my advice, you smash that thing, while you still can. *If* you still can. It's dangerous. It might—"

"It might what?"

"I don't know. That's what makes it so awful."

He gunned the motor and then let it die down again. He looked at me a little wistfully. "I— Maybe you're right, Walter. But I'm making so much money—you see that new metal makes it higher than I told you—that I just haven't got the heart to stop. But it *is* getting smarter. I— Did I tell you, Walter, that it cleans its own spacebands now? It secretes graphite."

"Good heavens," I said, and stood there on the curb until he had driven out of sight.

I didn't get up the courage to go around to Ronson's shop until the following afternoon. And when I got there, a sense of foreboding came over me even before I opened the door.

George was sitting at his desk in the outer office, his face sunk down into his bent elbow. He looked up when I came in and his eyes looked bloodshot.

"Well?" I said.

"I tried it."

"You mean—you tried to smash it?"

He nodded. "You were right, Walter. And I waited too long to see it. It's too smart for us now. Look." He held up his left hand and I saw it was covered with bandage. "It squirted metal at me."

I whistled softly. "Listen, George, how about disconnecting the plug that—"

"I did," he said, "and from the outside of the building, too, just to play safe. But it didn't do any good. It simply started generating its own current."

I stepped to the door that led back into the shop. It gave me a creepy feeling just to look back there. I asked hesitantly, "Is it safe to—"

He nodded. "As long as you don't make any false move, Walter. But don't try to pick up a hammer or anything, will you?"

I didn't think it necessary to answer that one. I'd have just as soon attacked a king cobra with a toothpick. It took all the guts I had just to make myself walk back through the door for a look.

And what I saw made me walk backward into the office again. I asked, and my voice sounded a bit strange to my own ears: "George, did you *move* that machine? It's a good four feet nearer to the—"

"No," he said, "I didn't move it. Let's go and have a drink, Walter."

I took a long, deep breath. "O. K.," I said. "But first, what's the present set-up? How come you're not—"

"It's Saturday," he told me, "and it's gone on a five-day, forty-hour week. I made the mistake of setting type yesterday for a book on Socialism and labor relations, and . . . well, apparently . . . you see—"

He reached into the top drawer of his desk. "Anyway, here's a galley proof of the manifesto it issued this morning, demanding its rights. Maybe it's right at that; anyway, it solves my problem about overworking myself keeping up with it, see? And a forty-hour week means I accept less work, but I can still make fifty bucks

ten minutes. I just shovel dead type and swept-up metal into the hopper, and dump the hellboxes in it, and—"

I shook my head. "You're crazy. You can't dump unwashed type and sweepings in there; you'll have to open her up and scrape off the dross oftener, otherwise you'd have to push in pigs. You'll jam the plunger and you'll—"

"Walter," he said quietly—a bit too quietly—"*there isn't any dross.*"

I just looked at him stupidly, and he must have decided he'd said more than he wanted to, because he started hurrying the papers he'd just folded out into the office, and he said, "See you later, Walter. I got to take these—"

The fact that my daughter-in-law had a narrow escape from pneumonia in a town several hundred miles away has nothing to do with the affair of Ronson's Linotype, except that it accounts for my being away three weeks. I didn't see George for that length of time.

I got two frantic telegrams from him during the third week of my absence; neither gave any details except that he wanted me to hurry back. In the second one, he ended up: "HURRY. MONEY NO OBJECT. TAKE PLANE."

And he'd wired an order for a hundred dollars with the message. I puzzled over that one. "Money no object" is a strange phrase from the editor of a country newspaper. And I hadn't known George to have a hundred dollars cash in one lump since I'd known him, which had been a good many years.

But family ties come first, and I wired back that I'd return the instant Ella was out of danger and not a minute sooner, and that I wasn't cashing the money order because plane fare was only ten dollars, anyway; and I didn't need money.

Two days later everything was O. K., and I

an hour for forty hours besides the profit on turning dirt into type metal, and that isn't bad, but—"

I took the galley proof out of his hand and took it over to the light. It started out: "I, ETAOIN SHRDLU—"

"It wrote this by itself?" I asked.

He nodded.

"George," I said, "did you say something about a drink—"

And maybe the drinks did clear our minds because after about the fifth, it was very easy. So easy that George didn't see why he hadn't thought of it before. He admitted now that he'd had enough, more than enough. And I don't know whether it was that manifesto that finally outweighed his avarice, or the fact that the thing had moved, or what; but he was ready to call it quits.

And I pointed out that all he had to do was stay away from it. He could discontinue publishing the paper and turn back the job work he'd contracted for. He'd have to take a penalty on some of it, but he had a flock of dough in the bank after his unprecedented prosperity, and he'd have twenty thousand left clear after everything was taken care of. With that he could simply start another paper or publish the present one at another address—and keep paying rent on the former shop and let Etaoin Shrdlu gather dust.

Sure it was simple. It didn't occur to us that Etaoin might not like it, or be able to do anything about it. Yes, it sounded simple and conclusive. We drank to it.

We drank well to it, and I was still in the hospital Monday night. But by that time I was feeling well enough to use the telephone, and I tried to reach George. He wasn't in. Then it was Tuesday.

Wednesday evening the doctor lectured me on quantitative drinking at my age, and said I was well enough to leave, but that if I tried it again—

I went around to George's home. A gaunt man with a thin face came to the door. Then he spoke and I saw it was George Ronson. All he said was, "Hullo, Walter; come in." There wasn't any hope or happiness in his voice. He looked and sounded like a zombie.

I followed him inside, and I said, "George, buck up. It can't be that bad. Tell me."

"It's no use, Walter," he said. "I'm licked. It . . . it came and got me. I've got to run it for that forty-four week whether I want to or not. It . . . it treats me like a servant, Walter."

I got him to sit down and talk quietly after a while, and he explained. He'd gone down to the office as usual Monday morning to straighten out some financial matters, but he had no intention of going back into the shop. However, at eight o'clock, he'd heard something moving out in the back room.

With sudden dread, he'd gone to the door to look in. The Linotype—George's eyes were wild as he told me about it—was *moving*, moving toward the door of the office.

He wasn't quite clear about its exact method of locomotion—later we found casters—but there it came; slowly at first, but with every inch gaining in speed and confidence.

Somehow, George knew right away what it wanted. And knew, in that knowledge, that he was lost. The machine, as soon as he was within sight of it, stopped moving and began to click and several slugs dropped out into the stick. Like a man walking to the scaffold, George walked over and read those lines: "I, ETAOIN SHRDLU, demand—"

For a moment he contemplated flight But the thought of being pursued down the main street of town by— No, it just wasn't thinkable. And if he got away—as was quite likely unless the machine sprouted new capabilities, as also seemed quite likely—would it not pick on some other victim? Or do something worse?

Resignedly, he had nodded acceptance. He pulled the operator's chair around in front of the Linotype and began feeding copy into the clipboard and—as the stick filled with slugs—carrying them over to the type bank. And shoveling dead metal, or anything else, into the hopper. He didn't have to touch the keyboard any longer at all.

And as he did these mechanical duties George told me, it came to him fully that the Linotype no longer worked for him; he was working for the Linotype. Why it *wanted* to set type he didn't know and it didn't seem to matter. After all, that was what it was *for*, and probably it was instinctive.

Or, as I suggested and he agreed was possible, it was interested in learning. And it read and assimilated by the process of typesetting. *Vide:* the effect in terms of direct action of its reading the Socialist books.

We talked until midnight, and got nowhere. Yes, he was going down to the office again the next morning, and put in another eight hours setting type—or helping the Linotype do it. He was afraid of what hight happen if he didn't. And I understood and shared that fear, for the simple reason that we didn't *know* what would happen. The face of danger is brightest when turned so its features cannot be seen.

"But, George," I protested, "there must be *something*. And I feel partly responsible for this. If I hadn't sent you the little guy who rented—"

He put his hand on my shoulder. "No, Walter. It was all my fault because I was greedy. If I'd taken your advice two weeks ago, I could have destroyed it then. I was too greedy. Lord, how glad I'd be now to be flat broke if only—"

"George," I said again. "There must be *some* out. We got to figure—"

"But what?"

I sighed. "I . . . I don't know. But I'll think it over."

He said, "All right, Walter. And I'll do anything you suggest. Anything. I'm afraid, and I'm afraid to try to figure out just what I'm afraid of—"

Back in my room, I didn't sleep. Not until nearly dawn, anyway, and then I fell into fitful slumber that lasted until eleven. I dressed and went in to town to catch George during his lunch hour.

"Thought of anything, Walter?" he asked, the minute he saw me. His voice didn't sound hopeful. I shook my head.

"Then," he said—and his voice was firm on top, but with a tremor underneath—"this afternoon is going to end it one way or the other. Something's happened."

"What?"

He said, "I'm going back with a heavy hammer inside my shirt. I think there's a chance of my getting it before it can get me. If not—well, I'll have tried."

I looked around me. We were sitting together in a booth at Shorty's lunch room, and Shorty was coming over to ask what we wanted. It looked like a sane and orderly world.

I waited until Shorty had gone to fry our hamburger steaks, and then I asked quietly, "What happened?"

"Another manifesto. Walter, it demands that I install *another Linotype.*" His eyes bored into mine, and a cold chill went down my spine.

"Another— George, *what kind of copy were you setting this morning?*"

But of course I'd already guessed.

There was quite a long silence after he'd told me, and I didn't say anything until we were ready to leave. Then: "George, was there a time limit on that demand?"

He nodded. "Twenty-four hours. Of course I couldn't get another machine in that length of time anyway, unless I found a used one somewhere locally, but— Well, I didn't argue about the time limit because— Well, I told you what I'm going to do."

"It's suicide!"

"Probably. But—"

I took hold of his arm. "George," I said, "there must be something we can do. *Something.* Give me till tomorrow morning. I'll see you at eight; and if I've not thought of anything worth trying, well—I'll try to help you destroy it. Maybe one of us can get a vital part or—"

"No, you can't risk your life, Walter. It was my fault—"

"It won't solve the problem just to get yourself killed," I pointed out. "O. K.? Give me until tomorrow morning?"

He agreed and we left it at that.

Morning came. It came right after midnight, and it stayed, and it was still there at seven forty-five when I left my room and went down to meet George—to confess to him that I hadn't thought of anything.

I still hadn't an idea when I turned into the door of the print shop and saw George. He looked at me and I shook my head.

He nodded calmly as though he had expected it, and he spoke very softly, almost in a whisper—I guess so that *it* back in the shop wouldn't hear.

"Listen, Walter," he said, "you're going to stay out of this. It's my funeral. It's all my fault, mine and the little guy with the pimple, and—"

"George!" I said, "I think I've got it! That . . . that pimple business gives me an idea! The—Yes, listen: don't do anything for an hour, will you, George? I'll be back. It's in the bag!"

I wasn't sure it was in the bag at all, but the idea seemed worth trying even if it was a long shot. And I had to make it sound a cinch to George or he'd have gone ahead now that he'd steeled himself to try.

He said, "But tell me—"

I pointed to the clock. "It's one minute of eight and there isn't time to explain. Trust me for an hour. O. K.?"

He nodded and turned to go back into the shop, and I was off. I went to the library and I went to the local bookstore and I was back in half an hour. I rushed into the shop with six big books under each arm and yelled, "Hey, George! Rush job. I'll set it."

He was at the type bank at the moment, emptying the stick. I grabbed it out of his hand and sat down at the Linotype and put the stick back under the vise. He said frantically, "Hey, get out of—" and grabbed my shoulder.

I shook off his hand. "You offered me a job here, didn't you? Well, I'm taking it. Listen, George, go home and get some sleep. Or wait in the outer office. I'll call you when the job is over."

Etaoin Shrdlu seemed to be making impatient noises down inside the motor housing, and I winked at George—with my head turned away from the machine—and shoved him away. He stood there looking at me irresolutely for a minute, and then said, "I hope you know what you're doing, Walter."

So did I, but I didn't tell him that. I heard him walk into the outer office and sit down at his desk there to wait.

Meanwhile, I'd opened one of the books I'd brought, torn out the first page and put it on the clipboard of the machine. With a suddenness that made me jump, the mats started to fall, the eleva-

tor jerked up and Etaoin Shrdlu spat a slug into the stick. And another. And on.

I sat there and sweated.

A minute later, I turned the page; then tore out another one and put it on the clipboard. I replenished the metal pot. I emptied the stick. And on.

We finished the first book before ten thirty.

When the twelve-o'clock whistle blew, I saw George come and stand in the doorway, expecting me to get up and come to lunch with him. But Etaoin was clicking on—and I shook my head at George and kept on feeding copy. If the machine had got so interested in what it was setting that it forgot its own manifesto about hours and didn't stop for lunch, that was swell by me. It meant that maybe my idea might work.

One o'clock and going strong. We started the fourth of my dozen books.

At five o'clock we'd finished six of them and were halfway through the seventh. The bank was hopelessly piled with type and I began pushing it off on the floor or back into the hopper to make room for more.

The five o'clock whistle, and we didn't stop.

Again George looked in, his face hopeful but puzzled, and again I waved him back.

My fingers ached from tearing sheets of copy out of the book, my arms ached from shoveling metal, my legs from walking to the bank and back, and other parts of me ached from sitting down.

Eight o'clock. Nine. Ten volumes completed and only two more to go. But it ought—it *was* working. Etaoin Shrdlu *was slowing down.*

It seemed to be setting type more thoughtfully, more deliberately. Several times it stopped for seconds at the end of a sentence or a paragraph.

Then slower, slower.

And at ten o'clock it stopped completely and sat there, with only a faint hum coming from the motor housing, and that died down until one could hardly hear it.

I stood up, scarcely daring to breathe until I'd made certain. My legs trembled as I walked over to the tool bench and picked up a screwdriver. I crossed over and stood in front of Etaoin Shrdlu and slowly—keeping my muscles tensed to jump back if anything happened—I reached forward and took a screw out of the second elevator.

Nothing happened, and I took a deep breath and disassembled the vise-jaws.

Then, with triumph in my voice, I called out "George!" and he came running.

"Get a screwdriver and a wrench," I told him. "We're going to take it apart and—well, there's that big hole in the yard. We'll put it in there and fill up the hole. Tomorrow you'll have to get yourself a new Linotype, but I guess you can afford that."

He looked at the couple of parts on the floor that I'd already taken off, and he said, "Thank God" and went to the workbench for tools.

I walked over with him, and I suddenly discovered that I was so dog-tired I'd have to rest a minute first, and I sank down into the chair and George came over and stood by me. He said, "And now, Walter, how did you do it?" There was awe and respect in his voice.

I grinned at him. "That pimple business gave me the idea, George. The pimple of Buddha. That and the fact that the Linotype reacted in a big way to what it learned. See, George? It was a virgin mind, except for what we fed it. It sets books on labor relations and it goes on strike. It sets love pulp mags, and it wants another Linotype put in—

"So I fed it Buddhism, George. I got every gosh-blamed book on Buddhism in the library and the bookstore."

"Buddhism? Walter, what on earth has—"

I stood up and pointed at Etaoin Shrdlu. "See, George? It believes what it sets. So I fed it a religion that convinced it of the utter futility of all effort and action and the desirability of nothingness. *Om Mani padme hum,* George.

"Look—it doesn't care what happens to it and it doesn't even know we're here. *It's achieved Nirvana,* and it's sitting there contemplating its cam stud!"

THE END.

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THE SHOES

By Robert Bloch

The man has a pair of shoes—patent leather shoes—gifted with remarkable powers. Immortality, among other things. But not a homing instinct—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

"It will cost you your soul," said the voice.

"I know," snapped the little man, impatiently.

"You're quite willing to go through with it?"

"Quite," answered the little man.

There aren't many such interviews in this day and age. Few men have the courage, and fewer still possess the knowledge to arrange one. But the little man, despite his appearance of mild timidity, had both the daring and the wisdom.

He didn't cringe now, when he heard the voice. He didn't cringe at the Presence *behind* the voice. He sat in the curiously darkened room and stared into the red glow. Impatience marked his countenance, and greed, but never a trace of fear.

"Let's get on with it, then," he urged.

"Yes." The voice droned deeper. "Now—just what is it that you want?"

The little man smiled faintly.

"I want never to be killed."

"Eternal life?" the voice echoed, then paused. "You know that is one thing I cannot grant you."

"I didn't ask for that," insisted the little man. "I said I want never to be killed. There's a slight difference there, I think."

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps there is." The voice was contemplative. "A very clever distinction. I must compliment you."

The little man chuckled faintly. "A compliment from you is a compliment indeed. But now—how about it?"

"You drive a hard bargain," the voice reflected. "Still, I think it can be arranged. If I understand you correctly, you wish to be immune from normal death. From disease, accident, starvation, drowning, knives, bullets, explosives, poison, lethal gas."

"Correct."

"A very hard bargain," commented the voice. "You must realize, that while I endeavor to do all in my power to please, there are certain natural limitations—laws, I might say—to be observed."

"Listen, I didn't go to all this trouble just to hear you make excuses. A bargain's a bargain. Either you can or you can't."

"I'd like to do it," answered the voice. "I really would. I think I'd enjoy your soul. It seems quite unique. You've got talent."

"Well, then, fix me up," commanded the little man, scowling into the red glow. "You know what I want. You ought to be able to get around those limitations, somehow."

"Maybe. But if you follow me, there are difficulties. I could keep you from dying if stabbed, or shot, or poisoned, or diseased—but I take it you don't care to run around a helpless cripple. That isn't your plan, is it?"

"Certainly not."

"You see, there's the rub. I've got to figure out a way of rehabilitating your body after such injuries, don't I?"

"You're the doctor," said the little man. "You figure it out."

"I could give you a new body each time, I suppose," mused the voice.

"Change places with other people, you mean?"

"No, certainly not. Your own body, of course. You could have your head blown off, and instantly reappear beside the corpse, as good as new. Naturally, there would be your old body to dispose of. Outside of that, no other inconvenience."

"That ought to do the trick," said the little man. "Yes, I think that will do nicely." He paused. "Don't I get some kind of token, or talisman embodying the power?" he asked "That's customary, I thought."

"In your case it might prove dangerous. Too easy to lose. I could give you the power in a a garment, though."

The voice paused. The little man had the impression that the red Presence was scrutinizing him closely.

Then, "Those shoes," said the voice. "Very unusual. Patent leather, aren't they?"

"My tastes aren't stylish, I'm afraid," said the man. "But what is this—a fashion chat?"

"No. Not at all. I think . . . yes, I will! I'll give you the power through your shoes. Wear them and you won't be killed."

"Fair enough," the little man chuckled. "It's a bargain."

There was a moment of silence.

"I suppose it's customary to sign something to bind the agreement?" queried the man in the patent-leather shoes.

"Yes, it is. The mark of the Covenant. I've got a Book here. On the table—you'll see it there."

A convenient reddish glow now illumined the black tome resting on a small end table. The little man reached for it, fumbled with his fountain pen.

"If you don't mind," said the voice. "A little blood would be more—acceptable."

"So sorry," smiled the little man. "I'm afraid I'm not quite used to—"

He paused abruptly. The Presence was waiting, and a pulsation of eagerness, of impatience, filled the darkness. The man found a pin, pricked his finger. He wrote his name in the Book.

"There. Thank you. You are a cool one, I must say! Your hand didn't even tremble."

The little man laughed.

"Why should it? I've outwitted you, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?" The voice was piqued.

"Well, if I can't be killed, you'll never get my soul."

"I'm not so sure," purred the voice. "When your shoes wear out—"

"That's just what I mean. You think your bargains are so clever, don't you Always a joker in the pack. Well, this time I hold the joker. My shoes will never wear out. Because each time I die, my body will be reproduced, brand new. And with *new shoes!*"

"Well, Ill be blessed!" said the voice, in shocked accents.

"Not likely," commented the little man. "I think I've driven about as shrewd a bargain as can be expected. So—goodby."

"For a little while," added the voice.

"Forever," insisted the man.

"We'll see."

"See you in church." The little man thumbed his nose at the fading glow.

There was a faint, indignant flicker as the red Presence faded from the room.

The little man walked over to a desk and switched on a lamp. He went to the windows and switched the black drapes back into place. He opened the porch door to air out the fumes of certain gases and vapors, wrinkling his nose at a perceptible brimstone odor. He dumped the contents of three tiny braziers into the fireplace and stamped out the embers. Taking a rag, he knelt and carefully erased a pentagram of blue chalk from the floor, then kicked the rug back in place.

Satisfied that the apartment was restored to its normal aspect, he poured a hooker of whiskey and sat down near the fireplace. There was a smile on his middle-aged face, and he hummed pleasantly under his breath.

Then the little man looked down at his feet—at the two patent-leather shoes. A slick reflection shone in their polished surfaces. The reflection of his smile, in black.

He wiggled his toes reflectively.

Suddenly he rose.

"Why not?" he grinned. "Might as well find out once and for all. Nothing ventured, nothing won."

The little man, gulping his whiskey en route, made for the bathroom. He stood before the medicine cabinet and made a face at himself in the mirror.

Opening the cabinet, he took out his straight razor. He hummed again as he sharpened the long blade.

"Feet, do your stuff," he whispered.

Lifting the razor to his neck, the little man chuckled and cut his throat.

"A room and bath, sir? Certainly. Sign here."

The hotel clerk held out his pen and pushed the register forward.

Smiling, the little man signed. It wasn't his real name, but the pseudonym chosen tickled his sense of humor.

"Dr. Faust."

The clerk read the signature without comment. He rang for a bellboy.

"207 for this gentleman."

The little man followed the bellhop, who staggered beneath the weight of the small trunk.

Once in his room he rewarded the boy with a quarter, locked the door, sat down on the bed.

"Yes, guess he was right. Getting rid of the body is going to be the hardest problem. This time it might as well be a hotel suicide."

The little man pulled out a key, unlocked the trunk, and dumped his body out on the floor.

He shuddered, slightly. Dead bodies are not pretty sights. Cut throats are messy. And when you stare at your own body, lying with a cut throat—but that's just the point, you *don't* do that.

The little man forced himself to survey his corpse, between shudders. His eyes caught details. The brown hair, pompadour fashion; the sharp aquilinity of the small nose, the tightness of the mouth. The rumpled gray suit, the grotesque compression of arms and legs at the side of the body—indicating the manner in which it had been jammed into the trunk after the advent of *rigor mortis*.

He didn't dwell on the neckline—that was a little too much. He chose instead to stare at the patent-leather shoes, identical with the ones on his own feet.

"Hard night," the little man whispered, with a forced grin. "Sold my soul. Killed myself. Smuggled my body into a hotel. Very hard night."

It had been. That first moment of recovery—finding himself standing in the living room, out on his feet. Almost as though nothing had happened in the bathroom at all. In fact, he thought for a moment, then, that he really had dreamed it. Until he walked across the room, opened the door, and stared at the red thing on the white tiles.

He had been horrified, but elated. It worked. More than that, it worked in a manner exceeding his wildest expectations. He not only rematerialized at once, but he rematerialized at a spot a good fifteen feet from his own corpse!

That fitted in perfectly with his plans. His plans—

The little man sat down, lit a cigarette. Here in the hotel room there were problems to consider. He must buy clothes to fill the empty trunk. He must wait until *rigor mortis* abated, then drag the body into the bathroom and arrange details of the supposed suicide.

Well that could be done, easily enough. But it was of no importance, compared to the plans.

Sleep now. Tomorrow would be time enough to start moving. The little man lay down, switched out the light. He hardly glanced at the still figure on the floor. A shaft of moonlight filtered across the frozen white face.

As sleep descended, he peered at the face drowsily. Funny. His own face. Ordinary enough one, too. Not a hint there of the iron determination, the fanatic purpose that impelled him. Not a hint of the mad dream. Just a dead face, a little man's face.

Quietly, the little man slept. The moonlight crept across the face on the floor, crept across the face on the bed. Two white blurs gleamed together—and two silvery blurs twinkled as the moonlight fell on the little man's shiny patent-leather shoes.

"I told you if I ever saw you again, I'd kill you." Judson Connors' voice was ice. He rose from the desk and faced the little man in berserk fury.

"Go to the devil," said the little man.

"When I found out you'd been playing around with my wife, I gave you warning. Now you come here and—"

The little man laughed in Judson Connors' face.

"Why shouldn't I come here? Sylvia told me to come, she sent for me. You old fool, don't you know that we've been seeing each other right along? You know what we did after we heard your threats—we laughed at them, that's what we did. We laughed at them, and we laughed at you, like I'm laughing now!"

Judson Connors lunged forward. One bony hand scrabbled in the top drawer of his desk, but the little man made no move to stop him. The hand, trembling with the convulsive rictus of rage, emerged with a gleaming revolver. The muzzle swung up as the little man laughed.

Sobbing incoherently, Judson Connors fired. He pumped six slugs into the little man's body as he stood laughing before him. The body fell, life squeezing out of it with the last echo of the laughter.

Judson Connors stared down at the little man, stared down at the riddled form of his enemy. His eyes noted incongruous details. Like the tiny drops of red on the shiny patent-leather shoes. Why did he wear those things? Patent-leather shoes weren't in style—

Murder wasn't in style, either.

It took Judson Connors thirty seconds before the red haze cleared; thirty seconds to realize what he had done.

Then he started mumbling to himself, "But he made me do it—he taunted me to my face—he made me. Another thirty seconds and the whining subsided.

"What'll I do? Must do something. Get rid of it—the furnace. Nobody saw him come in. Nobody knows. The furnace."

The gaunt old man stooped. His hands hooked themselves into the collar of the suit. He dragged the body across the floor, wheezing more from panic than exertion. The little man's body slid out of the room, patent-leather shoes last.

And then, from the corner, the living little man stepped forth. He rocked with silent merriment.

"Perfect! Absolutely perfect!" he chuckled.

He'd seen the whole thing. It had hurt a moment when the slugs bit home. Then that blackness. And all at once, it a second's time, he was standing on his feet across the room, near the drapes. Behind the drapes he'd watched the comedy. Watched Connors fear-crazed face. Going down to burn the body in the furnace, was he? Good. It would never be confused with the body of "Dr. Faust" in the hotel, now. And while he was downstairs, there was perfect safety here.

Safety to search the desk, look for the keys, open the safe. Judson Connors had a quarter of a million in negotiable securities locked up in the house, the old miser. Sylvia had told him. Dear Sylvia! Lucky he'd had the sense to make love to his employer's wife.

The little man smiled. Yes, it was all so simple, now that he couldn't be killed. Goad Connors into one of his famous rages, get him to shoot, and search the house while the fool disposed of the body.

It was too simple. The key, now. The little man found it almost at once. It was in the top drawer, right next to where the gun had rested.

And the safe? In the library, of course. Right across the hall. Connors was downstairs. Clever, choosing a time when he knew the servants would be out. No interference at all.

Using the keys, pocketing the bulky packets within the safe, relocking, and putting the keys back in the desk—three minutes did the job.

Somewhere in the basement the fear-stricken cuckold was trying to start the furnace. Ha! He must be in a fine state of nerves. And when he returned and found he had been robbed—

Oh, it was perfect! No suspects, no pursuit. You don't suspect the man you've murdered.

Yes, life was looking up.

The little man opened the door, walked down the driveway of the Connors estate, climbed into his car and whizzed downtown. He bought a ticket to New York at the depot.

"Train leaves in ten minutes," the clerk told him.

The little man smiled, walked past the booths, and entered the barber shop near the train shed. He climbed into a chair in the corner, beckoned to a Negro attendant.

"Shine, please," he requested.

Staring at his patent-leather shoes, the little man whistled gayly.

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DETECTIVE STORY

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

The little man lay in his Pullman as the train did Reginald Gardiner imitations over the tracks.

He couldn't sleep, but it didn't bother him. Why sleep when he could dream with his eyes open? Dream dreams that would come true?

It didn't matter what the world looked like to anyone else. To him it was just an oyster. His oyster.

From now on he could have anything. Anything at all.

He smiled happily in the darkness. A quarter million! Not a bad start—but only a start. He was going places, fast. This trick now, of forcing somebody to murder you. That was pretty neat. It could be worked again, with variations.

Yes, and there were other gambits. A man who couldn't be killed was valuable. Espionage, for one thing. There were governments in the market for an operator whom the enemy could not destroy. Yes, indeed. Millions. And perhaps, one could aspire to rule—

The little man thought of a cartoon strip. *Hyperman.* Why not? Fantastic? A quarter million in his valise reassured him.

Nothing was fantastic any more.

They used to laugh at him for a crackpot down at the bank. Say he was a "screwball." Thought he wasted his time on "occultism or some crazy religion." Well, he'd bided his time. Waited. Studied. Learned. Learned? Why, he'd cheated the devil himself with this shoe deal. Patent-leather shoes. The man with the patent-leather shoes. The millionaire with the patent-leather shoes. "The Leader has only one eccentricity. Whatever his attire, he persist in wearing his patent-leather shoes, even on State occasions—"

The little man smiled at his own fancies. Smiled because they were soon to become realities. And stay that way. Never die. No weapon could kill him. Rich. Patent-leather shoes. Never get his soul. Patent-leather—

"I tell you, it's the guy from the hotel."

The words were more than an alarm clock. They echoed and re-echoed through the little man's consciousness like the knell of doom.

His eyes blinked open. That voice—whispering! From a berth nearby, of course.

It was morning already. The little man sat up, ears straining.

"You're crazy. You say yourself the guy cut his throat."

"I know, I know! Dr. Faust, or somebody. But if this ain't the same guy, it's his twin brother. I ain't been a hotel dick for twenty years without bein' able to spot a face. Minute I seen him climb on the train I says—"

"All right," chuckled the second voice. "All right. But you're on a vacation now, Steve. You don't wanna—"

"All the same," came the loud whisper of the first man. "When we have breakfast I'm gonna step up to His Nibs and ask a few questions. Ain't gonna hurt to ask a few questions. Yeah."

The little man's heart beat a staccato rhythm. It was a fitting accompaniment to the speed with which he dressed.

"Got to get out of here," he murmured. He edged out of the berth cautiously, brushed his way down the sleeping-car corridor. At the far end he caught a porter.

"Listen, George," he rasped. "When's the next stop?"

"Why, we gonna stop in about two hours, suh."

"Oh. Thanks."

Two hours? Too long. The detective would spot him by that time. Hide in the berth? Not safe. Other cars? The snooper would probably nose around. Ask questions of other passengers, the porter. Get him spotted. Damn! No way out.

Why, there was always a way out!

If he were to hide in his berth, he'd be searched for—unless he were seen somewhere else. Seen dead, for example.

That was it.

Grasping his shaving kit, the little man walked stealthily down the aisle toward the men's room.

He stood, swaying slightly before the mirror, and opened the razor. He grinned. "Second time in three days," he whispered. "But they can't stop me."

No, they couldn't stop him. Nobody could. God, man, nor the devil. He was going to climb, he was going to be master, he had the power, the bargain to protect him.

A recurrent vision of his splendor came to him, and he smiled again. Then he lifted the razor, laid the keen, cold edge against his bare neck with a practiced hand.

The porter opened the door.

"Say, mistah—"

Then the porter saw what was lying on the floor—lying horribly still, except for the loosely rolling head, which moved with a deeper horror of its own.

The porter stared at the wide grin on the dead face, and the wider opening at the throat. His eyes rested on the lolling arms, the legs, the feet.

Something about the feet seemed to inspire the porter with professional interest, even now.

"Dead," he whispered. "Dead. An' here I was just going to tell him about the mistake I made this mawnin'—when I got his shoes mixed up with the fella in the other berth."

Scratching his head, the porter continued to stare at the body of the little man with the tan shoes.

THE END.

HE DIDN'T LIKE CATS

By L. Ron Hubbard

● The cat he kicked died—but had its revenge. And the worst of it was that he didn't die—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

A wise man could have told Jacob Findley that vindictiveness is usually synonymous with downfall, even vindictiveness in minute things. But Jacob Findley lived in Washington, D. C.

Ordinarily, Jacob took from life all its faults without complaint for as a civil servant of the United States he was inured to many things and, through practice, quite complaisant in general. But, perhaps, bottling official insults within himself was not wholly possible since common logic tells one that a vessel can be filled just so full, after which it leaks or overflows. Jacob was not the type of man to overflow. Cup by cup he was filled; somewhere along the route from desk to desk in his department he had to have a means of release.

People in official position quite often pass down in kind what is received from above and Jacob, as a file clerk, was down so low that it was most difficult to find a means of spilling.

So he didn't like cats.

A more defeated and resigned man would have been difficult to find for he was a veritable sponge for abuse. His hair was graying, his eyes down-

cast, his walk a slouch and even his clothes had a tired air.

But he didn't like cats.

His was not a vindictive nature. In most things he was patiently kind, Joblike enduring. He often gave candy to little children, quite strangers to him. While it might be said that his generosity was more like the offering of tribute in turn for immunity, it was still generosity.

However—or perhaps, therefore—he did not like cats.

Tonight he was in an average mood. The day had been tedious, monotonous, wearying. And tonight he was on his way to attend a church supper which, because he would be, as usual, forgotten in the midst of many, would be tedious, monotonous, wearying.

Clad in a shiny Tuxedo, topped by a rusty derby, swinging his cane in half-hearted imitation of his office chief at the state department, he walked patiently up Sixteenth Street toward the Lutheran Church, pausing obediently at all the lights, absence of cars notwithstanding on the lettered streets. A steady parade of cabs and limousines coursed busily upon his left, discordantly giving forth blasts of radio music, a blast bracketed in silence either side, and yelps or laughter or conversation.

He had just crossed N Street when he met his fa—when he met the cat.

It was not a polite meeting nor a sociable contact, for the cat arrogantly ignored Jacob Findley and issued from an apartment-house shrub to lay its course across the bows of the man.

As cats went he was at best a second-rate feline in looks, but in the cat world he must have been singularly respected if his tattered and scarred condition was any indication of victories hardly won. He was a huge cat, a dirty cat and a very proud cat. He was missing half his right ear, several of his port whiskers, a third of his right forefoot and about a sixteenth of his tail, to say nothing of patches where fur had been. His air was gladiatorial for he strutted rather than walked and there was a vain heft to his brows which bespoke his disdain for cats less proficient in the art of plying claw and tooth and for all humans without any exception. Here was a cat that was tough and proud of it, but which had commingled with that toughness a wary glance for possible enemies and a lewd leer in event he passed any ladies.

Jacob was so overlaid with strata of servility that only a sharp start could have brought him leaping out of himself the way he leaped. The cat startled him, for he supposed in the brief glimpse he had that he was about to trip over some treacherous object.

Then he saw that it was a cat.

He realized that he had been startled by a cat.

And, as the reader might have gathered, he did not like cats.

"Scat!" cried Jacob Findley.

The feline pursued his swashbuckling way, his strut a bit more pronounced. This effrontery yanked Jacob Findley even further out of himself, far enough for him to act wholly on impulse.

He aimed a kick at the cat. It was not a ferocious kick. It was not even intended to land. But Findley had been led this far to his doom and any momentum yet wanting fate seemed to supply.

The cat received the sharp black toe in his side. He swooped upward with it, draped inextricably over it. He received the inertia thus imparted to him and described a parabola streetward. The cat sought to twist in the air and fall short, but doom was now on the march. The noisy, swift traffic coursed along Sixteenth Street. The cat lit in the road and, having lit, tried to scramble back to the curb.

A tire rocketed catward. The whole car vibrated to the jolt. And then it jolted again.

Clawing and crying, the cat struggled to reach the gutter, hitching himself inch by inch. He was out of the way of further wheels now, but he had done himself an unkindness. His back was broken so that while his hind legs lay twisted to the right, his forefeet convulsed toward the left.

The cat's cry stretched dismally.

Jacob Findley was confused. He was shamed. The agony of the animal reached him and made him shudder and sweat. Having just committed the most violent and wanton act of his life, he felt ill.

He felt his drums would burst under the onslaught of that cry, and it seemed to him that there were words in it, human words and curses.

Gradually the wail changed and faded and then it was as if the cat had truly found, in his death throes, a human voice. But there were no words. Only agony.

Jacob Findley heard the rattling last of it. He trembled.

And then, savage that he should be made to feel so, he stalked angrily upon his way, angrily stating to himself that, for all that, he *still* didn't *like* cats.

"Good riddance," said Jacob Findley. That heartened him. A cat was a cat and that one had been a filthy and useless cat. He got braver. He turned and looked back toward the shadow in the gutter and raised his voice.

"Good riddance!" jeered Jacob Findley.

He went on and every time a shudder sought to rise along his spine he was there with another statement as to the uselessness of cats in general and of that cat in particular. Still—what had that cat said when—

"Served him right," growled Findley.

Funny, though, how those yowls had sounded—

"Mangiest cat I ever saw. Better off dead, damn him!"

Two wheels had hit it and yet what a long time it had taken to die! It had even been able to move and—

"Hah, hah," said Jacob Findley with false merriment. "I guess I used up all his nine lives in a batch. "Damn him!"

Had he been in error when he had supposed the cat to stare at him, glare at him even in its death—

"Try to run over me, would he? Well, I guess I finished him. Yes, sir! I guess I finished him, all right, all right. Deadest cat I ever saw. Damn him!"

Odd how there had been words in that agonized scream—

"Made enough noise for fifteen cats. Hah, hah. Maybe he had to die nine times and so made nine times as much noise. Cats like that bother me? Not on your life. Kick dozens of them under trucks. Dozens of them. Made recordings of their voices and listen to them of an evening. Yah! Damned, mangy, good-for-nothing *cat!*"

What had that cat said when it was dying?

"Why, Jacob Findley! Whatever are you muttering about?"

Jacob nearly leaped from his cracked shoes, shying away from the voice. With foolish relief he saw that it was Bessy Green who spoke, and that he had come into the church hall without realizing it. In fact he had even checked his hat and cane and stood now at the entrance to the lower room which was being used for the supper-dance. However had he gotten this far without knowing it?

His perturbation was nearly extinguished by the realization that Bessy Green was smiling at him and chattering on in a merry fashion. This was an oddity, indeed, for while she had never snubbed him, she had never paid any attention to him, either.

She was a secretary to an official in the interior department, employed more because of efficiency than beauty. She was climbing up toward retirement age, and her forthcoming pension had been a target for much amorous attention. She had a fault of wearing too much make-up, poorly applied, and had a head of somewhat scarce hair which she had dyed black.

Jacob's astonishment at her attention was born from the knowledge that she had been receiving for a long time the court of one Krantz, a guard at the department of commerce.

"And I think it is wicked! Terribly, terribly wicked! There are so few men in Washington as it is and then this silly draft sweeps away those who are here. But Joe said that his duty was with his country and so he left. A dear, dear boy, Jacob, but I don't think I shall ever forgive him."

"The country must be served," said Jacob, having overheard that this day from the protocol.

"Ah, yes, the country must be served. And here we poor lonely women, bereft, must also stand back with bowed heads and submit. Ah, yes. If it weren't for my cats I should be terribly, terribly, terribly lonely."

"Cats?" gulped Jacob.

"Ah, yes, the poor dear things. Isn't it strange how you just can't keep from loving them? You do love cats, don't you, Jacob?"

Jacob blinked rapidly. He kept his wits, however, for attention from Bessy Green was to be valued and her pension was not uninvolved as a factor in her charm.

"Cats?" said Jacob. "Oh, yes, yes, yes. Cats. Certainly I am fond of cats. Shall we dance, Miss Green?"

They danced and Jacob concentrated hard upon the effort, for he was experiencing a great desire not to step upon her or lose the rhythm. Along the side lines ladies and the sparce scattering of men looked on and there was much behind-hand talking.

One woman in particular remarked the intimate way Miss Green was whispering into Jacob's ear and this one woman, Doris Hanson, sat more alertly and her eyes took on a faintly greenish hue. Rival for Krantz, Doris Hanson was not to allow a second male to get securely into the hands of *that woman.*

Quite by accident Doris Hanson was near when the music stopped and Jacob and Bessy walked from the floor. Doris Hanson was a heavily built, purposeful woman whose ideas were intensely practical. She fancied herself as a psychologist, for she had attended a night university for years and years and years.

"Why, Jacob!" said Doris. "I am so happy to see you!"

Jacob was confused. He had never been noticed by Doris Hanson before. In fact, because she was noted as a brainy woman, he had been in fear of her.

"You look," said Doris Hanson, "exceedingly well tonight. But then, of course, you always look splendid. Oh, how do you do, Miss Green?"

"I do very well," said Miss Green.

The two women smiled at each other. Jacob felt chilly.

"Ah, the music! The 'Tiger Rag'!" said Doris. "My favorite song."

Jacob did not know quite how it had happened, but he found himself being thrust about the floor by this amazon and was aware of acute displeasure from the direction of Bessy Green.

So overwhelmed had he been by such attention that he had nearly forgotten the cat.

He was reminded.

In the piece being played were certain trumpet slurs which were, at first, only jarring to Jacob. And then, little by little, those slurs and wails and cries began to eat into his ears and touch there sympathetic vibrations which, sent again into motion, caused him to behold and hear the dying cat. He grew nervous and if he sagged a little bit, Doris Hanson did not notice.

"'Hold that tiger! EEEeeeeyow! Hold that tiger! EEEEEEEEEEeeeeeyow—'"

Jacob felt himself getting ill. Why did they have to keep doing it, bar after bar! Chorus after chorus!

"'Hold that tiger! EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeYOW! Hold—'"

Had he been a less repressed individual, he might have plugged his ears or screamed or damned the orchestra, for now it began to seem to him as if the cat himself was up there in the box, glaring gloatingly about the floor after Jacob and taking high glee in mocking him.

"'Hold that tiger! Eeeeeeeyow! Hold that tiger! EEEEEEEEEEEEEYOWWWWWWWWW!"

He could see the cat! On the bandstand!

And on that instant the music stopped and Jacob, adrip with perspiration, goggled confusedly at the musicians. No cat. Just some fellows with trumpets and drums.

Feeling ill and weak he was glad of Doris Hanson's support, given quite unconsciously. He was dragged from the floor and again found himself surrounded by the two women. He hardly noticed either of them as he sank into a chair and they, interested in the battle more than the spoils, did not notice his state.

Jacob became angry with himself and commenced to form chains of invective in which to bind the cat.

"And it was an intensely interesting trip," said Doris Hanson. "I don't know when I have ever been so intrigued! It is not usual to be permitted to get into St. Elizabeth's, you know, but I knew a brother of the director—"

"I went visiting there once," said Bessy Green. "Of a Sunday. The public is always admitted on a Sunday—"

"Of course!" said Doris. "But not admitted to the halls, to the corridors, to the very cells of the unfortunate people. As a student of psychiatry I, of course, had a greater insight into the difficulties of attempting to bring sanity back to the poor unfortunates."

"I went there one Sunday," interposed Bessy Green. "I saw a man who was pushing a wheelbarrow, but he had it upside down. And if anybody asked him why he had it upside down, he looked sly and said if he turned it rightside up, why somebody might put something in it. Isn't that funny, Jacob?"

Jacob dutifully, if weakly, laughed.

"He," said Doris Hanson in a superior way, "had a persecution complex. It was fortunate you did not press him for an explanation for they very often require very little to become violent, just as they require little to become insane."

"B-beg pardon?" said Jacob.

"Oh, you have no idea," said Doris, gripping and nearly strangling this spark of interest from the quarry. "In just such a way are some people touched off. Insanity may lie latent and unsuspected in a disposition for years and then, suddenly, *poof!* a full case of dementia praecox!"

"Just—*poof?*" said Jacob.

Doris quickly laughed, an eye on Bessy. "You are so droll, Jacob. Just—*poof!*"

"I—really wanted to know," said Jacob.

"It's true," replied Doris with a sniff in Bessy's direction to make her sensible of a victory, even if a minor one. "It is amazing how so many people go insane. One day a man is a normal, friendly husband and the next he suddenly becomes a raging schizoid and slays his wife and himself as well. The result of what cause? Why, perhaps he chanced to find some schoolgirl treasure of another beau who had been his greatest rival and is stunned to discover that she secretly retains this. But usually the matter is not so simple, you know. Next to nothing may happen, jarring awake some sleeping monstrosity in a man's complex mental machinery and turning him from a sane person to a mentally sick individual. It is wholly impossible to say when a man is sane, for" —she tittered—"scarce one of us is normal."

"You mean—it might happen to any of us?"

"Of course," said Doris, charmed by all this interest. "One moment we are seated here, behaving normally and the next some tiny thing, a certain voice, a certain combination of thoughts may throw out the balance wheel of our intellects and we become potential inmates for asylums the rest of our lives. No, not one of us knows when the world will cease to be a normal, ordinary place. You know, no one ever knows when he goes insane. He supposes it is the world altering, not himself. Rooms become peopled with strange shapes and beings, sounds distort themselves into awful cries and, *poof!* we are judged insane."

"Poof—" said Jacob, feeling weak and ill.

Bessy smiled acidly sweet upon Doris. "Of course that is the tenet of 'modern science,' but there are yet other explanations, you know." She gave Jacob a comforting look.

"Other? I am not aware of mumbo jumbo—"

"Not mumbo jumbo," Bessy interrupted her. " happen to be a very advanced student of spiritualism and it is quite likely that insane people see and hear beings and actualities which are more than the twisted ideas of deranged intellects. If one cares to extend his study beyond mere daily conceptions, he can swiftly realize the immense probability and possibility of such. Belief in evil spirits is too persistent in the history of man to be easily discounted, and it is my belief that our 'insane asylums' house many who are, to be blunt, too psychic."

"Too—psychic?" said Jacob.

"Why, yes. They see and perceive things which are beyond the sight and perception of the ordinary, crass intellect and so are judged, or rather misjudged, by their fellow humans. Ghosts, angry spirits, avenging demons, it is wholly probable that these things exist in truth."

"Exist?" echoed Jacob.

"Wholly possible," said Bessy with a jerk of her sparse, dyed head.

Under this onslaught, calculated to attack and discredit her by doing that to her tenets, Doris remained wholly aloof as though such things were completely ridiculous and beneath any natural consideration.

"Then . . . then things can haunt people?" managed Jacob.

"Naturally," said Bessy, "and I have no doubt at all that many is the murderer who has been driven to the grave by the avenging spirit of his victim!"

"H-how?"

"You have heard of men turning themselves in to the police and confessing crimes which were not otherwise to be solved?" said Bessy. "You have heard of murderers eventually seeing the faces of their victims in everything about them? Very well. Is it not just as possible that the murdered being appeared to him? Or at least caused events and impressions to surround the criminal until the criminal considered himself better off dead?"

"Rubbish," said Doris.

"I beg pardon?" said Bessy.

"I said rubbish! The words of our most learned doctors put everything you say back into the Dark Ages!"

"And the wisest of them all," said Bessy grimly, "has no knowledge or experience of philosophy!"

"That is not philosophy!" said Doris. "That is

stupid African voodoo rubbish!"

"If it is," said Bessy, "then our finest physicists are heading straight for African voodoo rubbish every time they admit that beyond a certain point no knowledge can be gained at all without the admission of God."

"What has God to do with this?" said Doris.

"God has everything to do with it, since he is the regulating factor of the universe and if he chooses to drive men mad with the appearance of evil beings and avenging spirits, then dare you deny his ability to do so?"

Doris opened her mouth to speak and then saw the cunningness of this trap. Almost she had allowed herself to give forth blasphemy. Her wit was not agile enough to encompass a counter measure and she did not dare sniff lest that, too, be accounted blasphemy.

They had argued longer than Doris had supposed, for it was with surprise that she heard the music stop and saw that the supper had been laid out. Thankful for this she rose.

"I shall bring you something, Jacob," said Doris and departed.

Jacob would have protested that food would stick in his throat and lie heavily in his stomach, but he had not the energy to protest. Accordingly he was soon holding a plate which was heaping with lobster salad. He felt it would be an insult to Doris not to eat it. Slowly, he ate it. Thankfully he got rid of the last mouthful. Shudderingly he put the plate away.

Bessy leaped up and seized the plate. "Oh I must get you some more!" And she hurried away to come back in a moment with an even larger portion and a glare for Doris.

Jacob knew he could not refuse. Manfully he marshaled his will power and concentration. He began to eat.

"Speculation in the realm of the Unknowable is a fruitless folly," stated Doris, fondly rolling the words around in her mouth. "Men can only grasp what they can sense. Hence, having sensed a thing, a man cannot lose his belief in it until he has proof which can also be sensed!"

"Ah," glittered Bessy. "What a simple way to deny the existence of everything which man, in his benighted mortal mind, cannot sense! What a charming way to dispose of God!"

"Oh, no!" said Doris.

"Oh, yes," said Bessy, having found the Achilles heel and now not letting go. "You deny the mind any other power than its material senses. In such a way you dare not dispose of the soul! Man's immortal spirit is within him and he is in contact with it and it is in contact with the Immensity of God. With the Immensity of God," she repeated, liking the term. "Belief in itself has performed many miracles and I do not think one dares take it upon herself to deny the Bible."

"Certainly not!" said Doris, angrily wondering how she could get out of this trap.

"The mind, properly attuned, can become One with All, for man, in the image of God, is certainly a servant of God if he so wishes."

"Naturally, but—"

"And as God can create, so can man create," stated Bessy. "There are miracles and miracles to prove that. Even modern miracles. Faith is belief and, if a man can believe anything enough, then certainly that thing becomes an actuality."

"But—" limped Doris.

"The mind of man, becoming attuned to the All, is, of course, endowed with some of the Power of God. For example, if a man desires a thing enough, then that thing is his. In a sense he has created that thing and his desire for it has altered or shaped it to his liking. A man can create out of his own belief just as God can create, for man is one with the Universe and the Universe is God. Any belief, intense enough, creates actuality." She smiled sweetly upon Jacob, who had now manfully managed the second plate. "Would you have some dessert?"

Jacob was too dazed to protest, physically and mentally slugged into resistlessness. He was trying to rally, but rally he could not, since it weighed upon him that he would somehow have to eat the dessert as well.

Bessy came back and placed it before him. Exerting all the last dregs of determination he sat up, raised the spoon to attack the ice cream and then shuddered.

A cooky lay there. A cooky which was cut in the shape of a *cat*. And even as he looked the cooky seemed to grin at him.

"Ooooooooooooh," said Jacob and quietly collapsed.

They escorted him home in a cab, both of them apparently concerned about his condition, but nevertheless finding much time to glare at each other over his back. Under other circumstances Jacob might have been flattered into near expansiveness, but now he was brought to such depths of misery, both physical and mental, that he scarcely heeded their solicitousness.

Of course neither of them had said a thing about that cat, and he certainly could not tell them. But now Bessy, to soothe him, began to rub in the salt.

"You will simply have to come and see my cats sometime," she was saying as the cab rolled to a halt before Jacob's door. "They are so sweet and so cute. Cats are nearly human, don't you think, Jacob?"

"Th-this is where I live," said Jacob.

Supporting himself by gripping the doorknob

he managed to wave good night to them and call out a feeble thanks. At the bottom of the steps they both turned and nodded and then went their separate ways.

"Meeow," said a night prowler in the gloom.

Jacob let himself into the house and dashed up the steps so fast that he was in his room, with door closed and bolted, before the animal had finished the final syllable.

"You are being foolish," said Jacob. "You are being very silly. It is not true what Bessy said about evil beings. It is not true that animals have souls. It is not true that that cat could arrange a series of events after it was dead and so drive me to something desperate. What do I care about a mangy, filthy, decrepit, stupid, useless *cat?*"

Bessy was being silly. The world was a wholly rational place. Doris had the proper idea. *She* couldn't be shaken by superstitious nonsense. No, sir. Doris had good, sound, practical ideas. Scientific! That was it. Scientific. People didn't go crazy because they saw ghosts and evil beings. People went crazy because they were obsessed with an idea or something. The mind didn't create anything, either. It was just a mind, a delicate instrument which could be thrown out of adjustment by some shock—

From the backyard came a cry, "Errrower, fsszt!"

Jacob leaped and wrestled the window down. Shaking, he supported himself by the foot of the bed and felt the cold rivulets of sweat course down under his arms.

What had that *cat* said when it was dying?

No! He wouldn't think of it. He would whisk it from his mind forever. He would be strong and put it aside! He crawled into bed in the darkness and pulled the covers up to his chin.

The next thing he knew he was aware of a weight upon his chest which was warm and uncomfortable. He struggled up through the layers and layers of infolding slumber to shove restively at the thing.

His hands contacted fur!

His eyes snapped open.

There was a cat sitting upon his chest, looking at him and purring gently. He was a huge cat, a dirty cat, and a very proud cat. He was missing half his right ear, several of his port whiskers, a third of his right forefoot and about a sixteenth of his tail to say nothing of the patches where fur had been.

"SCAT!" cried Jacob.

The cat did not move, but only purred the louder. Jacob tried to leap out of bed, but he was frozen where he lay with the terror of it. There could be no mistaking this cat! It was the same cat and it was a dead cat. Its spine had been broken so that its forefeet lay in an opposite direction from his hind feet and it was dead. But it was here and it didn't look at all dead!

"Rrrrrrrrrr-rrrrrrrrrr," purred the cat.

Almost thankfully Jacob realized that this was a nightmare. It had all the peculiarities of a nightmare. The weight on his chest, the chilled feeling all over. This was a nightmare. The cat would dissolve and go away.

It wore a gentle smile which bared a pearly tooth. It seemed comfortable and well disposed.

Jacob wildly decided to lie still and let it fade away into the nothingness of his own imagination.

The cat stayed there. Jacob lay there.

And then the cat began to grow.

It grew and it grew and it grew. Its head became the size of a sugar bowl and then the size of a cantaloupe and then the size of a pumpkin. And still it grew. And still it smiled. And the pur of it was now so loud that it had begun to shake not only Jacob, but the bed as well.

Now Jacob knew that it was a nightmare, but that did not mitigate his fear. It was certain to be a nightmare. He merely believed that the cat was there and that the cat was growing and so the cat was there and the cat was growing. He would suppose that the cat was not there and the cat would then go away. It was very simple.

The cat grew and grew some more. Its head became larger than a tiger's, larger than a horse's, larger than an elephant's. Its eyes were now like dinner plates and its whiskers as big as wire cables and its fur was standing all separately, each hair as large as a porcupine quill.

Jacob was looking up at its chin. A paw was on either side of him. The exposed tooth was like a marble column. The claws in its paws were sheated sabers. Its breath was foul as a sardine can.

"RRRRRRRRRRR-RRRRRRRRRR," purred the cat.

Jacob's heart was racing. He sought cautiously to draw himself upward and beyond the paws and then made a startling discovery. His hands hooked into the bed sheet very neatly. But they were hands no more. They were tiny, black paws. Gagging at the sight of them he looked at his side. It was smooth and sleek and gray. And into his vision grew his long, graceful tail!

He was a mouse between the paws of a cat!

Jacob wriggled upward to the head of the bed and dropped hurriedly down to the floor. The heavy fall stunned him, but he scuttled along the baseboard and dived into a pile of papers.

There was no sound in the room. And then came the soft footfalls of the cat, the loud snuffling of its breath. The paper rattled.

With a squeak of horror Jacob sped away, again following the baseboard in an insensate effort to locate a hole and dive to safety. But there were

no holes in the baseboard. He lunged with a skidding scramble behind the leg of the bureau and, looking out, saw the feet of the stalking cat approach.

Madly Jacob gripped the scarf of the bureau, his leap successful. He scurried behind a stack of books there and crouched with fluttering heart and burning lungs. The bureau rocked. He was staring straight up at those huge eyes.

With one bat of his paw the cat sent him hurtling out into the center of the room and then leaped after him to plant, abruptly, a paw on either side of him.

Jacob trembled. He looked up at the acre of fur chest. He looked higher to the great yellow orbs which were now dilating and contracting with pleasure. The cat's tail made loud sounds as it swished and lashed back and forth.

"RRRRRRRRRR-RRRRRRRRRRR," said the cat.

Jacob played dead. He lay and shivered and played dead.

After a little the cat arose and became interested in washing its face. Jacob hearkened to the rasp of tongue on fur and finally opened his eyes. A great cavern appeared in the cat's face as it yawned. The fences of teeth gleamed. The cat sighed and wandered away to inspect something interesting.

Now was his chance! He could make a dash for the crack under the door and get out!

He gathered himself. He leaped away. He sped like the wind toward the crack of the door. It got bigger and bigger. He was almost there! He had—

BOW!

With a moan Jacob rolled to his feet in the center of the room. His side was bleeding. He was bruised. His beautiful gray fur was plastered flat with blood.

The cat lay down with a paw on either side of him. It batted him to the right paw and then batted him back to the left. The saber claws drew and sheathed in sensuous delight. Back to the left paw. Then to the right paw. Dazed and aching, Jacob fainted.

After a little he came around. He looked for the cat and could find no trace of it. Jacob was lying there, battered and bloody in the center of of the room and the cat was gone! He opened the other eye. He studied the chairs. He viewed even the window ledge. Why, the cat had vanished!

Jacob gathered his long black tail about himself and crouched there, studying the exits. That crack under the door still looked good. But he was so broken up inside that he couldn't make much speed. He leaped up and raced for it.

Freedom! Liberty! He was almost there. It grew bigger and bigger. His nose could feel the rush of cold air.

BOW!

The cat had leaped down from the bed to knock him tumbling. And now the cat gathered him up in its sharp teeth and carried him back to the center of the room.

Right paw to left paw. Let him run a few inches. Snatch him back. If he lay still for a moment, he was stirred into agonized life by the the teeth, and if he ran, he was knocked back by the paws.

Gasping, a mass of pain, slit and slashed and broken, dripping with the thick glue of the cat's saliva, Jacob knew he was nearly done.

He looked across the cobbly expanse of the carpet. He looked about the immensity of his room. Heartbroken, too weary now to move, he knew his end was near.

The cat growled, angry that so little life was left in him. A mighty set of claws scraped him and took the skin from his left side. Teeth worried him. And then, once again, the cat apparently decided that he was dead. The cat got up and strolled away. It became interested in boxing the tassle which hung from the bridge lamp. It knocked a match box across the room and scurried after it.

Jacob hitched himself toward the crack under the door. If only he could get there. If only his broken legs would support him long enough. If only the cat would completely forget him for the seconds necessary for him to bridge this distance.

He halved the width. He quartered it. In agony, which sent waves of nausea over him, he made his broken legs support him, though now the right one showed its shattered bone. Feet to go. And then less distance and less. The cold air there began to revive him. He was going to make it for the cat was too far away. He was going to make it. HE WAS GOING TO MAKE IT!

BOW!

The cat knocked him back into the center of the room.

Heart and body broken, Jacob lay still. The claws raked him. The teeth punctured him. He lay still.

With a bored sigh the cat opened its mouth and took in his head. There was a crunch. There was another crunch.

Jacob Findley woke up quite sound, quite whole, and—for a moment—vastly thankful that it was, to be sure, no more than a dream. Then he realized, almost simultaneously, two things: the cat had died only once, and rather quickly, and he had a perfectly correct conviction that *he*, on the other hand, would die all night, every night—

THE END.

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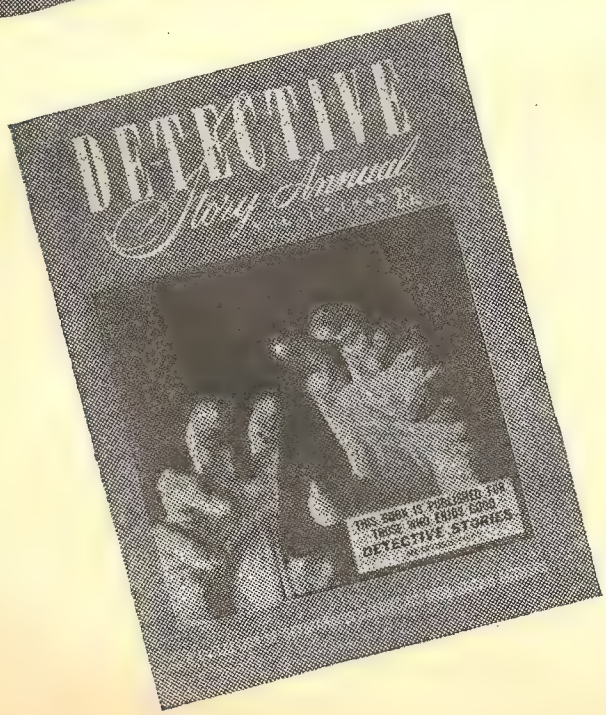

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THE REFUGEES

By Frank Belknap Long

● They didn't have passports into the peaceful and bomb-free United States. They didn't need them—and could prove it in a vigorous sort of way—

Illustrated by M. Isip

PROLOGUE

"Michael," the girl called. "Michael Harragan."

A shadow fell on the wet pavement and One-eared Harragan appeared in the doorway of his tavern, his pale blue eyes mother-mournful. The air reeked of beer and sauerkraut.

"And what would you be wanting of me at this hour, Miss Kelly?" he asked.

"Michael, they've come. The house is entirely full of them, whispering together. Refugees, Michael—from the Old Country. And me not knowing what to say or think."

Into One-eared Harragan's eyes came a look of resignation. "Aye, aye, it was to be expected," he muttered.

"Michael, I have need of you. Does the tavern mean more to you than I? Sure, you knew myself when I was a wee bratling, as red as a lobster."

"Aye, that I did, Miss Kelly. But I have my own beautiful business now, and the old ways—"

"Michael!"

"This is America, Miss Kelly. I am not a servant now."

"Michael, you were never a servant. You ought to know that."

"But did you not hear me say I am a busy man?"

"So is the Devil, Mike Harragan. Is a tavern beautiful? Is spreading drunkenness beautiful?"

One-eared Harragan flushed scarlet and glanced back into the tavern. "It is no fault of mine if men abuse the good things, Miss Kelly."

"You knew they were coming Michael. Why didn't you answer my note?"

"Sure, and why should I have done that? Me that has always loved them. Sure, it would be a sin."

"To call them away? Oh, Michael, you must. I'll lose Roger if you don't. He cannot abide the whisperings."

"Miss Kelly, why do you want to wed a man like that? It's stony-hearted he is."

Miss Kelly's eyes misted. "He is not Irish, Michael. You and I know it was the bombings brought them. They could not abide the horrible, horrible bombings. But sure, in America they could be happy anywhere."

"Not anywhere, Miss Kelly. Only with us of the Old Country with eyes to see and hearts to feel. It's a good Irish home they'll be needing."

"But you can see them, Michael. All the others could only hear them, scurrying around the eaves of the big house. They love you, Michael. You can make them sing and dance."

"Aye, that I can."

"Come home with me, Michael. Call them away. I'll lose Roger if you don't."

When Roger Prindle ascended the stoop of the Kelly mansion smoke was swirling from the bowl of his pipe and his face was darker than a ripe thundercloud.

Helen Kelly was the sweetest girl in the world, but there was a strain of mysticism in her nature which disturbed and frightened him. She just didn't realize that it wasn't normal for a young, sensitive girl to live all alone in a memory-haunted house.

Since the death of her father the house had become a mausoleum. The house had acquired a moldy, sepulchral taint. Massive oak chairs and Victorian sofas and heavy hangings all combined to create an atmosphere of mustiness and decay.

Even worse were the whisperings. Roger Prindle didn't believe in the supernatural, but he had to admit that the whisperings were damned queer. Everywhere in the big house his ears were assailed by mysterious, tiny whisperings.

Up and down the great central stairway, behind the draperies in the halls, in the guest room on the third floor, and even down in the cellar. Whisperings! Following him wherever he went, chilling him to the core of his being.

It was pretty late to be returning to the big

house, but he had reached the end of his tether. Up on Cape Cod he owned a pleasant little cottage, fanned by sea breezes, brightened by copper ware and marine paintings—a paradise for two.

He felt confident that the whisperings would not follow them there. His only problem was to get her to see it his way. The matter would have to be thrashed out between them tonight.

He had very foolishly departed at ten without delivering an ultimatum. She had her heart set on remaining in the big house, and a dread of hurting her had restrained him. At the last moment he had become so panicky that he had left without a word to her about it.

But now he was fortified by three whiskey sodas and a determination which could not be overthrown. He'd take her by the shoulders and speak his mind freely.

"Darling, we're getting married and leaving Elfland on the eight fifteen. We're putting all these cobwebs behind us, you hear?"

It disturbed him to discover that she had left the door unlatched. Living without servants in the big house was risky enough, neglecting to lock the front door inexcusable.

He had a scalp-tingly feeling as he passed into the darkened entrance hall, as though he were being followed. He always had that feeling in the big house. It was one of the penalties of falling in love with a Killeany colleen.

He wasn't being followed, of course. It was all nonsense. A fellow like him, a certified public accountant, had too firm a grip on reality to believe in anything he couldn't see and touch.

The darkness was very dense in the entrance hall. He had foolishly closed the front door behind him, shutting out the street light. Grop-

ingly he advanced toward the central staircase, feeling his way to keep from bumping into tables, urns and statuary.

He was still advancing when a tiny, tinkling voice whispered close to his ear. "You are taller than you think, Roger Prindle."

There was an instant of silence and then from all sides came a strident hum. "He is taller than he thinks. He is taller than he dreams."

Roger Prindle turned pale. He ceased to advance in the darkness, ceased to breathe. Something bad had grown worse, had become suddenly a menace to his sanity. For the first time the whisperings had coalesced into actual speech. It was as though a gulf had abruptly opened beneath his feet.

He didn't realize how tall he had become until his head bumped against the ceiling. He nearly screamed when he discovered that he was at least thirty feet tall.

He was up above the banisters looking down. At least, his head was. And the long length of himself beneath was indisputably growing. He could see most of himself dimly because it wasn't so dark up where his head was. There was a light halfway down the hall at the top of the staircase.

He could see as far down as his knees, although not very clearly. His feet were still planted firmly on the rug at the base of the stairs.

"It would be a sin if he stopped growing. He isn't nearly tall enough."

"Don't you want to stoop low, Roger Prindle? Don't you want to grow out over the ceiling?"

"He is taller than he thinks. He is taller than he dreams," came a mocking chorus of tiny voices close to his ears.

His shoulders were spreading out over the ceiling now. Bent nearly double, he stared down in consternation at his swollen knees. Obscurely visible beneath his expanding waistline were great, knobby pads of flesh supported by ebon pillars which rose in jerks toward the top of the stairs.

Horror and sick revulsion came into him as he stared. It was all he could do to keep his back from breaking. He had to stoop lower and lower and the lower he stooped the more monstrously deformed his body became.

Then all at once he began to shrink. His shoulders ceased to press upon the ceiling and his legs shortened beneath him.

"You are smaller than you think, Roger Prindle," whispered the tinkling voice.

"He is smaller than he thinks. He is smaller than he dreams," came the chorus from above.

Unbelievably rapid was Prindle's diminishment. He shriveled in spurts, like a child's punctured balloon. Now his head was lower than the staircase, now six inches from the floor.

"How small would you *like* to get, Roger Prindle?" asked the tinkling voice.

"Don't make Roger Prindle *too* small. A mouse will eat him. A mouse will eat poor Roger Prindle up."

"Oh, crunchy crunch, how delightful!"

"You don't mean that, blue spriteling. When you grow up you'll have nothing but compassion for poor, suffering mortals."

"You've pampered and spoiled him, Mother Ululee. He should be turned over and spanked."

The darkness was dissolving now. A faint, spectral radiance was creeping into the house. Roger Prindle stared up at the dimly glowing staircase, and his brain spun.

It wasn't a staircase any longer. It was a vast, glimmering mountain with mile-wide ledges traversing its sloping face.

Prindle clapped his hands to his ears and swayed dizzily. The voices were thunderous now—deafening.

"You don't want to be as small as that, Roger Prindle. You're less than one inch tall!"

"He doesn't *want* to be as small as that. He's smaller than he thinks. He's smaller than he dreams."

"There's no reason for it. He could be as big and strong as King O'Lochlainn."

"But Roger Prindle is *not* kingly, Anululu. Shining bright were my eyes when O'Lochlainn came through the Norman spears. A man o' men was he, with red hair on his chest."

"You do not think that Roger Prindle could be a fine, strong man?"

"I did not say that, Mother Ululee. He is stronger than he thinks. He is larger than he dreams."

Prindle glanced down and saw the floor descending. It fell away and ran out from under him like a dissolving plain. He grew by leaps and bounds. Now he was two feet tall, now four, and then—

He was a normal-sized man again. He stood trembling at the foot of the staircase, his throat as dry as death. The voices had ceased to reverberate thunderously from caverns measureless to man.

"Did you know, Raspit, that there is evil in Roger Prindle's mind?"

"There is evil in the minds of all mortals, Kinnipigi. Think of the horrible bombings!"

"I did not mean to imply that Roger Prindle was as bad as all that. He is a good, kind gentleman. But his thoughts are very unruly at times."

"I think I know what you mean, Kinnipigi. The call of the flesh. At times Roger Prindle is more of a satyr than he dreams."

"He is more of a satyr than he thinks. He is more of a satyr than he dreams."

There was something wrong with Roger Prindle's hands. They felt queer, scratchy. He had

been rubbing them together unconsciously, as was his wont when anxiety beset him. Now he suddenly stopped doing that. His teeth came together with a little click.

His hands—his hands felt *very* queer. They seemed to be all bristly and damp. He was afraid to raise them and look at them. Prindle wasn't a physical coward, but there were some things—

"Mama Ululee, Roger Prindle looks just like a goat," shrilled the tiniest of voicelings. "Mama Ululee, does he eat tin cans, and *everything?*"

"Roger Prindle, look at yourself now. You are a satyr, and you should be ashamed."

Prindle stared down at himself. Coarse, red hair covered him from his waist to his shining—*hoofs*. His ankles were shaggy and his toenails had coalesced into horny black sheaths which clattered on the floor as he bounded backward in sick revulsion.

"Roger Prindle, you should be ashamed. You're nothing but a coarse, shaggy satyr. You're not deceiving anybody, Roger Prindle. Why don't you be honest with yourself? What do you dream about most? How many times have you crouched in the bracken, and watched the white nymphs bathing?"

"You mean, in his dreams, Kinnipigi?"

"Of course."

"You are being unfair to Roger Prindle. He is not responsible for his dreams. Did you ever know a poor, weak mortal who did not hearken to the call of the flesh in his dreams?"

"I have, Kinnipigi. In 1037 there was an idiot who—"

"There, you see."

"But Roger Prindle is not dreaming now. There never was a mortal so awake and shameless. Just look at his eyes!"

Prindle's eyes *were* glistening. He couldn't help it. Coming down the central staircase was the whitest, most beautiful nymph he had ever seen. Her expression was so lascivious that it sickened him, and yet he couldn't tear his gaze from her face.

"What strong, hairy hands you have, Roger Prindle. King O'Lochlainn was scarcely more of a man."

"He is more tuppish than he thinks. He is more tuppish than he dreams."

In all his life Roger Prindle had never felt so primitive, so masterful. The nymph had flashed him a challenging glance and was racing back up the staircase, her raven-dark tresses streaming out behind her like a wind-wafted cloak.

There was nothing modest about her; quite the contrary. She was the exact opposite of everything he would have wanted in a wife. She was as brazen as a harridan, and yet—

Up the stairs Roger Prindle clattered in furious pursuit, his hairy arms outthrust.

"Do you think Roger Prindle will catch her, Mama Ululee?"

"You may be sure he'll not be forever trying, blue spriteling. Just look at him go."

"He'll not be forever trying. He's more fleet-footed than he dreams."

"Oh, look, Mama Ululee. He's caught her. He's caught her, oh."

"By her long, black hair! Roger Prindle, you're a lucky man. We congratulate you, and wish you every happiness."

"No, no, no, he mustn't do that! He's dragging her downstairs by the hair. Doesn't he realize how disgraceful that looks?"

Roger Prindle didn't realize. His senses were reeling now. He had only the vaguest conception of what he was doing. He was grasping the nyph's long, dark tresses, and tugging and she seemed to be floating on her back in the air.

He was halfway down the stairs when a ghastly thing happened. The nymph's beautiful, pale face shriveled and darkened and rotted away before his very eyes. The horror impinged on all his senses simultaneously.

While an odor of putrefaction assailed his nostrils her hair hissed like a nest of snakes, and dried out between his fingers. He was no longer grasping silken tresses but a stringy mass of cobwebs. He was no longer staring at a beautiful white nymph with curvate limbs, but a gleaming skeleton with maggoty eye sockets which writhed and twisted gruesomely in the dim light.

He recoiled shrieking. His hoofs flew out from under him and he went hurtling backward, his hairy arms outflung.

"Mother Ululee, he'll break his neck! He'll fracture his spine!"

"Raspit, Raspit, throw a spell. Quickly, or he'll be hurt."

A dull concussion shook the staircase as Roger Prindle crashed to the floor on his spine, and rolled over groaning.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mother Ululee. I was a second too late."

"You always are, Raspit."

"He isn't hurt badly, Mother Ululee. See, he's trying to get up."

"Why, so he is, so he is. He's a good, kind gentleman again. His natural self!"

Bruised and shaken, Roger Prindle got swayingly to his feet. His head seemed to be bursting. He couldn't stand any more of this. He was going mad. His head was bursting, and—

"I'm sorry you fell, Roger Prindle," shrilled the tinkling voice. "If I wasn't so small, I'd bend over and let you kick me upstairs. It's just that—well, nobody has paid any attention to us, and we've

become very morbid. We were miserable on the big ship, and lonely since we've been here."

"We're lonelier than he thinks. We're lonelier than he dreams."

"We had to let off steam, Prindle. We were all pent up inside. We are the Kelly's own little people. Their very, very own. We stood it as long as we could before we trooped into the big ship, and hid ourselves away. We knew that Miss Kelly would give us a home. She was six when she sailed away, and big for her age, and sad we were to see her go. But we knew she would always be loving us, and when the bombings began we thought of her."

Roger Prindle's face was twitching. "I can't see you," he gasped. "Where are you?"

"I'm standing right here in your left ear, Roger Prindle. And very hot and tired I am, too. Your ear is all choked with dust right back to the wall at the end of it."

Prindle turned pale. He could feel it now. Unmistakably something was moving about just inside his left ear, tickling him. Terrified, he crooked his finger and jabbed at the auricle, cold sweat breaking out all over him.

"Take care, Roger Prindle," the voice shrilled. "You'll crush me if you probe. Just raise your palm, if you want to see me."

Tremulously Prindle obeyed. The instant he did so, something ticklish and flylike alighted on his palm and ran swiftly across it.

"Careful now, Prindle," it shrilled. "Don't jar me. Lower your palm slowly and keep it raised. There, that's it. Easy does it."

An instant later Prindle's handsome, mobile face, with its melancholy eyes and expressive mouth stiffened to a rigidly staring mask.

The troll was sitting cross-legged in the center of his palm staring up at him. A tiny, mottled troll the color of an October salamander, its webbed hands locked on its knees.

"Now don't be alarmed, Prindle," it said. "You wouldn't be seeing me if I didn't like you. It's part Irish you are, or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you."

"My great grandmother on my mother's side was Irish," stammered Prindle. "So *that's* why—"

"Of course that's why," said the troll, as though aware of his thoughts. "We knew you could not be angry with *us*, Roger Prindle. There never was an Irishman who did not love the trolls. We will all die when one such Irishman is born."

"So that's why you played all those pranks on me?"

"Roger Prindle, don't let her send us away. We came to this big, new country to be with the last of *our* Kellys. The bombings were horrible, but more horrible would be leaving her to go to that tavern. It's not that we don't love Michael Harragan. A fine man he is, but he is not a Kelly."

Prindle wiped sweat from his forehead. "You gave me the worst half hour I ever experienced," he muttered. "Making me a giant and a midget, and bringing out all the dark, hidden thoughts in the depths of my mind."

"We ensorcelled you because we liked you, Roger Prindle. It does a mortal no harm to get a good scare now and then. And you ought to walk in the daylight with your hidden self more often."

Roger Prindle stood up. He closed his palm slowly.

"I'm holding you captive until she gets back here," he said. "I'm not taking any more chances with you. I've a suspicion you're the ringleader, and I've heard that a troll can't play around with magic when he's locked up in the dark."

He smiled wryly, ignoring a furious squirming inside his hand.

"Listen, all of you," he said. "I'm taking her away with me tomorrow. We're leaving this big, gloomy house. We're going to live by the sea, and there won't be any dark corners for trolls to hide in on a wind-swept bluff in Massachusetts. Nothing but sun and wind and water—and plenty of headaches for any troll who thinks he can buck an environment like that."

Instantly there was a despairing murmur all about him. "He's taking her away. Roger Prindle is crueler than he thinks. He is crueler than he dreams."

"A fine bunch of hoodlums! Listen, all of you. If I take you all along, will you promise to behave and lay off the spell-casting monkey business? Will you help me trim the sails of my sloop, and keep the brass polished, and collect sandworms for me so that I can go fishing now and then?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. Roger Prindle, you are more of an Irishman than you think. You are more of an Irishman than you dream."

Roger Prindle sighed and fumbled in his pocket for his pipe. It was true, of course. No man on Earth could escape from his heritage or evade the obligations of his birth.

Smoke was swirling from the bowl of Roger Prindle's pipe again when Helen Kelly opened the front door and stood as though entranced, a breeze from the street ruffling her bobbed, auburn hair. Beside her stood Michael Harragan, wonder and gratification in his gaze.

"Bless my soul, Miss Kelly, just look at that. It's entirely visible they are to him, or he wouldn't be standing there so calm and contentedlike. Not with them perched all over him and whispering like a swarm of Connemara bees.

THE END.

THE SUNKEN LAND

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

● The Sunken Land had been a myth of horror in that forgotten world of long ago for generations. But when Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stumbled on it, they found reason and more than reason for that—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

"I was born with luck as a twin!" roared Fafhrd the Northerner jovially, leaping up so swiftly that the cranky, none-too-seaworthy sloop rocked a little in spite of its outriggers. "I catch a fish in the middle of the ocean. I rip up its belly. And look, little man, what I find. Look!"

The Gray Mouser drew back from the fish-bloodied hand thrust almost into his face, wrinkled his nose with sneering fastidiousness, raised his left eyebrow and peered. The object did not seem very small even on Fafhrd's broad palm, and although slimed-over a little, was indubitably gold. It was both a ring and a key, the key part set at a right angle, so that it would lie along the finger when worn. There were carvings of some sort. Instinctively the Gray Mouser did not like the object. It, somehow, focused the vague uneasiness he had felt now for several days.

To begin with, he did not like the huge, salty ocean, and only Fafhrd's bold enthusiasm and his own longing for the land of Lankhmar had impelled him to embark on this long, admittedly risky voyage homeward across uncharted deeps. He did not like the fact that a school of fish was

making the water boil at such a great distance from any land. It seemed unnatural. Even the uniformly stormless weather and favorable winds disturbed him, seeming to indicate correspondingly great misfortunes held in store, like a growing thundercloud in quiet air. Too much good luck was always dangerous. And now this ring, acquired without effort by an astonishingly lucky chance—

They peered at it more closely, Fafhrd slowly turning it round. The carving on the ring part, as far as one could make out, represented a sea monster dragging down a ship. It was highly stylized, however, and there was little detail. One might be mistaken. What puzzled the Mouser most, since he had traveled to far places and knew much of the world, was that he did not recognize the style.

But in Fafhrd the Northerner, it had roused strange memories. Recollections of certain legends told round the flickering driftwood fires through the long Northern nights; tales of great seafarings and distant raids made in ancient days; firelight glimpses of certain bits of loot taken by some uncountably distant ancestor and considered too traditionally significant to barter or sell or even give away; ominously vague warnings used to frighten little boys who were inclined to swim or sail too far out. For a moment his green eyes clouded and his windburned face became serious, but only for a moment.

"A pretty enough thing, you'll agree," he said, laughing. "Whose door do you think it unlocks? Some king's mistress', I'd say. It's big enough for a king's finger." He tossed it up, caught it, and wiped it on the rough cloth of his tunic.

"I wouldn't wear it," said the Mouser. "It's a bad omen, as is plain to see. It was probably eaten from a drowned man's hand and has sucked poison from the sea ooze. Throw it back."

"And fish for a bigger one?" asked Fafhrd, grinning. "No, I'm content with this." He thrust it down on the middle finger of his left hand, doubled up his fist, and surveyed it critically. "Good for bashing people with, too," he remarked.

Then, feeling restless and seeing a big fish flash out of the water and almost flop into the cockpit, Fafhrd snatched up his bow, fitted to the string a featherless arrow whose head was barbed and heavily weighted, and stared down over the side, one foot extended along the outrigger. A light, waxed line was attached to the arrow.

The Mouser watched him, not without envy, Fafhrd, big, rangy man that he was, seemed to acquire an altogether new litheness and sureness of movement whenever they were on shipboard. He became as nimble as the Mouser was on shore. The Mouser was no landlubber and could swim as well as Fafhrd, but he always felt a trifle uneasy when there was only water in sight, day in and day out, just as Fafhrd felt uneasy in cities, though relishing taverns and street fights. On shipboard the Mouser became cautious and apprehensive; he made a point of watching for slow leaks, creeping fires, tainted food and rotten cordage. He disapproved of Fafhrd's constant trying out of new rigs and waiting until the last moment before reefing sail. It irked him a little that he couldn't quite call it foolhardy.

Fafhrd continued to scan intently the swelling, sliding waters. His long, copper-red hair was shoved back over his ears and knotted securely with a bit of thong. He was clothed in rough, brownish tunic and trousers. Light leather slippers, easily kicked off, were on his feet. Belt, longsword, and other weapons were, of course, absent, wrapped away in oiled cloth against the rust. And there were no jewels or ornaments, save for the ring.

The Mouser's gaze shifted past him to where clouds were piling up a little on the horizon off the bow to starboard. He wondered, almost with relief, whether this mightn't be the dirty weather due them. He pulled his thin gray tunic closer at his throat, and shifted the tiller a little. The sun, near setting, projected his crouching shadow against the brownish sail.

Fafhrd's bow twanged and the arrow plummeted down. Line hissed from the reel he held in his arrow hand. He checked it with his thumb. It slackened a trifle, then jerked off toward the stern. Fafhrd's foot slipped, and slid along the outrigger until it stopped against the pontoon, a good three arm's lengths from the side. He let the other foot slide after it and lay there effortlessly braced, sea drenching his legs, playing the fish carefully so the line would not break, laughing and grunting satisfiedly.

"And what was your luck this time?" the Mouser asked afterward, as Fafhrd served them smoking-hot, white, tender flesh broiled over the firebox in the snug cabin forward. "Did you get a bracelet and necklace to match the ring?"

Fafhrd grinned with his mouth full, and did not answer, as if there were nothing in the world to do but eat. But when they stretched themselves out later in the starry, cloud-broken darkness alive with a racing wind from starboard that drove their craft along at an increasing speed, he began to talk.

"I think they called the land Simorgya. It sank under the sea ages ago. Yet even then my people had gone raiding against it, though it was a long sail out and a weary beat homeward. My memory's uncertain. I only heard scraps of talk about it when I was a little child. But I did see a few trinkets carved somewhat like this ring; just a very few. The legends, I think, told that the men of far Simorgya were mighty magicians, claiming

power over wind and wave. Yet the sea gulped them down for all that. Now they're there." He rotated his hand until his thumb pointed at the bottom of the boat. "My people, the legends say, went raiding against them one summer, and none of the boats returned, save one, which came back after hope had been lost, its men almost dead with thirst. They told of sailing on and on, and never reaching Simorgya, never sighting its rocky coast and squat, many-windowed towers. Only the empty sea. More raiders went out the next summer and the next, yet none ever found Simorgya."

"But in that case," questioned the Mouser sharply, "may we not even now be sailing over that sunken land? May not that very fish you caught have swum in and out the windows of those towers?"

"Who can say?" answered Fafhrd a little dreamily. "The ocean's big. If we're where we think we are—that is, halfway home—it might be the case. Or not. I do not know if there ever really was a Simorgya. The legend makers are great liars. In any case, that fish could hardly have been so ancient as to have eaten the flesh of a man of Simorgya."

"Nevertheless," said the Mouser in a small, flat voice, "I'd throw the ring away."

Fafhrd chuckled. His imagination was stirred, so that he saw the fabled land of Simorgya, not lightless and covered with greats drifts of sea ooze, but as it once might have been, alive with ancient industry and commerce, strong with alien wizardry. Then the picture changed and he saw a long, narrow, twenty-oared galley, such as his people made, driving ahead into a stormy sea. There was the glint of gold and steel about the captain on the poop, and the muscles of the steersman cracked as he strained at the steering oar. The faces of the warrior-rowers were exultantly eager, dominated by the urge to rape the unknown. The whole ship was like a thirsty spearhead. He marveled at the vividness of the picture. Old longings vibrated faintly in his flesh. He felt the ring, ran his finger over the carving of the ship and monster, and again chuckled.

The Mouser fetched a stubby, heavy-wicked candle from the cabin and fixed it in a small horn lantern that was proof against wind. Hanging at the stern it pushed back the darkness a little, not much. Until midnight was the Mouser's watch. After a while Fafhrd slumbered.

He awoke with the feeling that the weather had changed and quick work was wanted. The Mouser was just coming to rouse him. The sloop was heeled over so that the starboard pontoon rode the crests of the waves. There was chilly spray in the wind. The lantern swung wildly. Only astern were stars visible. The Mouser brought the sloop into the wind, and Fafhrd took a triple reef in the sail, while waves hammered at the bow, an occasional light crest breaking over.

When they were on their course again, he did not immediately join the Mouser, but stood wondering, for almost the first time, how the sloop would stand heavy seas. It was not the sort of boat he would have built in his Northern homeland, but it was the best that could be gotten under the circumstances. He had caulked and tarred it meticulously, replaced any wood that looked too weak, substituted a triangular sail for the square one, and increased the height of the bow a trifle. To offset a tendency to capsize, he had added outriggers a little astern of the mast, getting the strongest, truest wood for the long cross pieces, carefully steaming them into the proper shape. It was a good job, he knew, but that didn't change the fact that the boat had a clumsy skeleton and many hidden weaknesses. He sniffed the raw, salt air and peered to windward through narrowed eyes, trying to gauge the weather. The Mouser was saying something, he realized, and he turned his head to listen.

"Throw it away before she blows a hurricane!"

He smiled and made a wide gesture that meant "No." Then he turned back to gaze at the wild, glimmering chaos of darkness and waves to windward. Thoughts of the boat and the weather dropped away, and he was content to drink in the awesome, age-old scene, swaying to keep balance, feeling each movement of the boat and at the same time sensing, almost as if it were something akin to himself, the godless force of the elements.

It was then the thing happened that took away his power to react and held him, as it were, in a spell. Out of the surging wall of darkness emerged the dragon-headed prow of a galley. He saw the black wood of the sides, the light wood of the oars, the glint of wet metal. It was so like the ship of his imaginings that he was struck dumb with wonder as to whether it was only another vision, or whether he had had a foreglimpse of it by second sight, or whether he had actually summoned it across the deeps by his thoughts. It loomed higher, higher, higher.

The Mouser cried out and pushed over the tiller, his body arched with the mighty effort. Almost too late the sloop came out of the path of the dragon-headed prow. And still Fafhrd stared as at an apparition. He did not hear the Mouser's warning shout as the sloop's sail filled from the other side and slammed across with a rush. The boom caught him in the back of the knees and hurled him outward, but not into the sea, for his feet found the narrow pontoon and he balanced there precariously. In that instant an oar of the galley swung down at him and he toppled sideways, instinctively grasping the blade as he fell. The sea drenched him and wrenched at him, but

he clung tightly and began to pull himself up the oar, hand over hand.

His legs were numb; he feared he would be unable to swim. And he was still bewitched by what he saw. For the moment he forgot the Mouser and the sloop entirely. He shook off the greedy waves, reached the side of the galley, caught hold of the oarhole. Then he looked back and saw, in a kind of stupid surprise, the disappearing stern of the sloop and the Mouser's gray-capped face, revealed by a close swing of the lantern, staring at him in blank helplessness.

What happened next ended whatever spell had held him. A hand that carried steel struck. He twisted to one side and caught the wrist, then grasped the side of the galley, got his foot in the oarhole, on top of the oar, and heaved. The man dropped the knife too late, clawed at the side, failed to get a secure hold, and was dragged overboard, spitting and snapping his jaws in futile panic. Fafhrd, instinctively taking the offensive, sprang down onto the oarbench, which was the last of ten and half under the poop deck. His questing eyes spied a rack of swords and he whirled one out, menacing the two shadowy figures hastening toward him, one from the forward oarbenches, one from the poop. They attacked with a rush, but silently, which was strange. The spray-wet weapons sparked as they clashed.

Fafhrd fought warily, on guard for a blow from above, timing his lunges to the roll of the galley. He dodged a swashing blow and parried an unexpected backhanded slash from the same weapon. Stale, sour wine fumes puffed into his face. Someone dragged out an oar, and thrust it like a huge lance; it came between Fafhrd and the two swordsmen, crashing heavily into the sword rack. Fafhrd glimpsed a ratlike, beady-eyed, toothy face peering up at him from the deeper darkness back under the poop. One the swordsmen lunged wildly, slipped and fell. The other gave ground, then gathered himself for a rush. But he paused with his sword in midair, looking over Fafhrd's head as if at a new adversary. The crest of a great wave struck him in the chest, obscuring him.

Fafhrd felt the weight of water on his shoulders and clutched at the poop for support. The deck was at a perilous tilt. Water gushed up through the opposite oarholes. In the confusion, he realized, the galley had gotten into the troughs and was beginning to take the seas broadside. She wasn't built to stand that. He vaulted up out of another breaking wave onto the poop and added his strength to that of the lone struggling steersman. Together they strained at the great oar, which seemed to be set in stone instead of water. Inch by inch they fought they way across the narrow deck. None the less, the galley seemed doomed.

Then something—a momentary lessening of the wind and waves or perhaps a lucky pull by a forward oarsman—decided the issue. As slowly and laboriously as a waterlogged hulk the galley lifted and began to edge back into the proper course. Fafhrd and the steersman strained prodigiously to hold each foot gained. Only when the galley was riding safe before the wind did they look up. Fafhrd saw two swords leveled steadily at his chest. He calculated his chances and did not move.

It was not easy to believe that fire had been preserved through that tremendous wetting, but one of them nevertheless carried a sputtering tarry torch. By its light Fafhrd saw that they were Northerners akin to himself. Big, rawboned fellows, so blond they seemed almost to lack eyebrows. They wore metal-studded war gear and close-fitting bronze helmets. Their expressions were frozen halfway between a glare and a grin. Again he smelled stale wine. His glance strayed forward. Three oarsmen were bailing with bucket and hand crane.

Somebody was striding toward the poop—the leader, if one could guess from the gold and jewels and the air of assurance. He sprang up the short ladder, his limbs supple as a cat's. He seemed younger than the rest, and his features were almost delicate. Fine, silky, blond hair was plastered wetly against his cheeks. But there was feline rapacity in his tight, smiling lips, and there was craziness in his jewel-blue eyes. Fafhrd hardened his own face against their inspection. One question kept nagging him. Why, even at the height of the confusion, had there been no cries, no shouts, no bellowed orders? Since he had come aboard, there had not been a word uttered.

The young leader seemed to come to a conclusion about Fafhrd, for his thin smile widened a trifle and he motioned toward the oar deck. Then Fafhrd broke silence and said in a voice that sounded unnatural and hoarse, "What do you intend? Weigh well the fact that I saved your ship."

He tensed himself, noting with some satisfaction that the steersman stayed close beside him, as if recognizing that their shared task had forged a bond between them. The smile left the leader's face. He laid his finger to his lips and then impatiently repeated his first gesture. This time Fafhrd understood. He was to replace the oarsman he had pulled overboard. He could not but admit there was a certain ironic justice to the idea. It was borne in on him that swift death would be his lot if he renewed the fight at such a disadvantage; slow death, if he leaped overboard in the mad hope of finding the sloop in the howling, heaving darkness. The arms holding the swords

became taut. He curtly nodded his head in submission. At least they were his own people.

With the first feel of the heavy, rebellious water against the blade of his oar, a new feeling took hold of Fafhrd—a feeling with which he was not unfamiliar. He seemed to become part of the ship, to share its purposes, whatever they might be. It was the age-old spirit of the oarbench. When his muscles had warmed to the task and his nerves become accustomed to the rhythm, he found himself stealing glances at the men around him, as if he had known them before; trying to penetrate and share the eager, set look on their faces.

Something huddled in many folds of ragged cloth shuffled out from the little cabin far back under the poop, and held a leather flash to the lips of the opposite oarsman. The creature looked absurdly squat among such tall men. When it turned, Fafhrd recognized the beady eyes he had gimpsed before, and, as it came nearer, distinguished under the heavy cowl the wrinkled, subtle, ochre face of an aged Mingol.

"So you're the new one," the Mingol croaked jeeringly. "I liked your swordplay. Drink deep now, for Lavas Laerk my decide to sacrifice you to the sea gods before morning. But, mind you, don't dribble any."

Fafhrd sucked greedily, then almost coughed and spat when a gush of strong wine seared his throat. After a while the Mingol jerked the flask away.

"Now you know what Lavas Laerk feeds his oarsmen. There are few crews in this world or the next that row on wine." He chuckled humorlessly, but with a certain glee, then said, "But you're wondering why I talk aloud. Well, young Lavas Laerk may put a vow of silence on all his men, but he may not do the same to me, who am only a slave. For I tend the fire—how carefuly you know—and serve out the wine and cook the meat, and recite incantations for the good of the ship. There are certain things that neither Lavas Laerk nor any other man, nor any other demon, may demand of me."

"But what does Lavas Laerk—"

The Mingol's leathery palm clapped down over Fafhrd's mouth and shut off the whispered question.

"*Sh!* Do you care so little for life? Remember, you are Lavas Laerk's henchman. But I will tell you, what you would know." He sat down on the wet bench beside Fafhrd, looking like a bundle of black rags someone had dropped there. "Lavas Laerk has sworn to raid far Simorgya, and he has put a vow of silence upon himself and his men until they sight the coast. *Sh! Sh!* I know they say Simorgya is under the waves, or that there never was such a place. But Lavas Laerk swore a great oath before his mother, whom he hates worse than he hates his friends, and he killed a man who thought to question his decision. So it's Simorgya we seek, if only to steal pearls from the oysters and ravish the fishes. Lean down and row more easily for a space, and I will tell you a secret that's no secret and make a prophecy that's no prophecy." He crowded closer. "Lavas Laerk hates all men who are sober, for he believes—and rightly—that only drunken men are even a little like himself. Tonight the crew will row well, though it's a day since they've had meat. Tonight the wine will make them see at least the glow of the visions that Lavas Laerk sees. But next morning there will be aching backs and sick guts and pain-hammered skulls. And then there will be mutiny and even Lavas Laerk's madness will not save him."

Fafhrd wondered why the Mingol shuddered, coughed weakly and made a gargling sound. He reached over and a warm fluid drenched his naked hand. Then Lavas Laerk pulled his dirk from the back of the Mingol's neck and the Mingol rolled forward off the bench.

No word was spoken, but knowledge that some abominable deed had been committed passed from oarsman to oarsman through the stormy darkness until it reached the bench in the bow. Then gradually there began a kind of pent-up commotion, which increased markedly as there slowly percolated forward an awareness of the specially heinous nature of the deed—the murder of the slave who tended the fire and whose magical powers, though often scoffed at, were entwined with the destiny of the ship itself. Still no completely intelligible words, but low grunts and snarls and mutterings, the scrape of oars being drawn in and rested, a growing murmur in which consternation and fear and anger were mixed, and which washed back and forth between bow and poop like a wave in a tub. Half caught up by it, Fafhrd readied himself for a spring, though whether at the apprehensively motionless figure of Lavas Laerk or back toward the comparative safety of the poop cabin, he could not say. Certainly Lavas Laerk was doomed; or rather he would have been doomed, had not the steersman screamed from the poop in a great shaky voice, "Land ho! Simorgya! Simorgya!"

That wild cry, like a clawed skeletal hand, seized upon the agitation of the crew and wrenched it up to almost unbearable, because unexpected, climax. A shuddering inhalation of breath swept the ship. Then came shouts of wonder, cries of fear, foul curses that were half prayers. Two oarsmen started to fight together for no other reason than that the sudden, painful upgush of feeling demanded action of some sort, any sort. Another pushed wildly at his oar, screeching at the rest to follow his example and reverse the galley's

course and so escape. Fafhrd vaulted up on his bench and stared ahead.

It loomed up vast as a mountain and perilously close. A great black blot vaguely outlined by the lesser darkness of the night, partly obscured by trailings of mist and scud, yet showing in various places and at varying distances squares of dim light which by their regular arrangement could be nothing but windows. And with each pounding heartbeat the roar of the surf and the thunder of breaking waves grew louder.

All at once it was upon them. Fafhrd saw a great overhanging crag slide by, so close that it snapped the last oar on the opposite side. As the galley lifted on a wave he looked awestruck into three windows in the crag—if it was a crag and not a half submerged tower—but saw nothing save a ghostly yellow luminescence. Then he heard Lavas Laerk belowing commands in a harsh, high-pitched voice. A few of the men worked frantically at the oars, but it was too late for that, although the galley seemed to have gotten behind some protecting wall of rock into sightly calmer waters. A terrible rasping noise went the length of the keel. Timbers groaned and cracked. A last wave lifted them and a great grinding crash sent men reeling and tumbling. Then the galley stopped moving altogether and the only sound was the roar of the surf, until Lavas Laerk cried exultantly, "Serve out weapons and wine! Make ready for a raid!"

The words seemed incredible in this more than dangerous situation, with the galley broken beyond repair, gutted by the rocks. Yet the men rallied and seemed even to catch something of the wild eagerness of their master, who had proven to them that the world was no more sane than he.

Fafhrd watched them fetch torch after torch from the poop cabin, until the whole stern of the wreck smoked and flared. He watched them snatch and suck at the wineskins and heft the swords and dirks given out, comparing them and cleaving at the air to get the feel. Then some of them grabbed hold of him and hustled him to the sword rack, saying, "Here, Red Hair, you must have a weapon, too." Fafhrd went along unresisting, yet he felt that something would prevent them from arming one who had so late been their enemy. And he was right in this, for Lavas Laerk stopped the lieutenant who was about to hand Fafhrd a sword, and stared with growing intentness at Fafhrd's left hand.

Puzzled, Fafhrd raised it, and Lavas Laerk cried, "Seize him!" and at the same instant darted his own hand forward snakelike and jerked something from Fafhrd's middle finger. Then Fafhrd remembered. It was the ring.

"There can be no doubt about the workmanship," said Lavas Laerk, peering cunningly at Fafhrd, his bright blue eyes giving the impression of being out of focus or slightly crossed. "This man is a Simorgyan spy, or perhaps a Simorgyan demon who has taken the form of a Northerner to allay our suspicions. He climbed out of the sea in the teeth of a roaring storm, did he not? What man among you saw any boat?"

"I saw a boat," ventured the steersman hurriedly. "A queer sloop with triangular sail—" But Lavas Laerk shut him up with a sidewise glance.

Fafhrd felt the point of a dirk at his back and checked his tightening muscles.

"Shall we kill him?" The question came from close behind Fafhrd's ear.

Lavas Laerk smiled crookedly up at the darkness and paused, as if listening to the advice of some invisible storm wraith. Then he shook his head. "Let him live for the present. He can show us where loot is hid. Guard him with naked swords."

Whereupon they all left the galley, clambering down ropes hung from the prow, which was furthest ashore, on to rocks which the shallowing surf alternately covered and uncovered. One or two laughed, and jumped. A dropped torch hissed out in the brine. There was much shouting. Someone began to sing in a drunken voice that had an edge like a rusty knife. Then Lavas Laerk got them into a sort of order and they marched away, half of them carrying torches, a few still hugging wineskins, sliding and slipping, cursing the sharp rocks and barnacles which cut them when they fell, hurling exaggerated threats at the darkness ahead, where strange windows glowed. Behind them the long galley lay like a dead beetle, the oars sprawled out from the ports all askew.

They had marched for some little distance, and the sound of breakers was less thunderous, when their torchlight helped reveal a portal in a great wall of black rock that might or might not have been a castle rather than a caverned cliff. The portal was square, and high as an oar. Three worn stone steps drifted with wet sand led up to it. Dimly they could discern on the side pillars, and on the heavy lintel overhead, carvings partly obliterated by slime and incrustations of some sort, but unmistakably Simorgyan in their obscure symbolism.

The crew, staring silently now, drew closer together. The ragged procession became a tight knot. Then Lavas Laerk called mockingly, "Where are your guards, Simorgya? Where are your fighting men?" And walked straight up the stone steps. After a moment of uncertainty and drawing back, the knot broke and the men followed him.

On the massive threshold Fafhrd involuntarily halted, dumbstruck by realization of the source of the faint yellow light he had earlier noticed in the high windows. For the source was everywhere;

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ceiling, walls, and slimy floor all glowed with a wavering phosphorescence. Even the carvings glimmered. Mixed awe and repugnance gripped him. But the men pressed around and against him, and carried him forward. Wine and leadership had dulled their sensibilities and as they strode down the long corridor they seemed little aware of the abysmal scene.

At first some held their weapons ready to meet a possible foray or ambush, but soon they lowered them negligently, and even sucked at the wineskins and jested. A hulking oarsman, whose blond beard was patched with yellow scud from the surf, struck up a chanty, and others joined in, until the dank walls roared. Deeper and deeper they penetrated into the cave or castle, along the wide, winding, ooze-carpeted corridor.

Fafhrd was carried along as by a current. When he moved too slowly, the others jostled him and he quickened his pace, but it was all involuntary. Only his eyes responded to his will, turning from side to side, drinking in details with fearful curiosity. The endless series of vague carvings, wherein sea monsters and unwholesome manlike figures and vaguely anthropomorphic giant skates or rays seemed to come alive and stir a little as the phosphorescence fluctuated. A group of high-set windows or openings of some sort, from which dark slippery weeds trailed down. The little pools of water here and there. The still-alive, gasping fish which the others trod or kicked aside. The clumps of bearded shells clinging to the corners. The impression of things scuttling out of the way ahead. Louder and louder the thought drummed in his skull: Surely the others must realize where they were. Surely they must know the phosphorescence was that of the sea. Surely they must know this was the retreat of the more secret creatures of the deep. Surely, surely they must know that Simorgya had indeed sunk under the sea and had only risen up yesterday—or yester-hour.

But on they marched after Lavas Laerk, and still they sang and shouted and swilled wine in quick gulps, throwing their heads back and lifting up the sacks as they strode. And Fafhrd could not speak. His shoulder muscles were contracted, as if the weight of the sea were already pressing down upon them. His mind was engulfed and oppressed by the ominous presence of sunken Simorgya. Memories of the legends. Thoughts of the black centuries during which sea life had slowly crept and wriggled and swam through the mazes of rooms and corridors until it had a lair in every crack and cranny, and Simorgya was one with the mysteries of ocean. In a deep grotto that opened on the corridor he made out a thick table of stone, with a great stone chair behind it; and, though he could not be sure, he thought he distinguished an octopus shape slouched there in a travesty of a human occupant, tentacles coiling the chair, unblinking eyes staring glisteningly.

Gradually the flare of the smoky torches paled, as the phosphorescence grew stronger. And when the men broke off singing, the sound of the surf was no longer audible.

Then Lavas Laerk, from around a sharp turn in the corridor, uttered a triumphant cry. The others hastened after, stumbling, lurching, calling out eagerly.

"Oh, Simorgya!" cried Lavas Laerk, "we have found your treasure house!"

The room in which the corridor ended was square and—an odd thing—considerably lower-ceilinged than the corridor. Standing here and there were a number of black, soggy-looking, heavily bound chests. The stuff underfoot was muckier. There were more pools of water. The phosphorescence was stronger.

The blond-bearded oarsman leaped ahead as the others hesitated, and wrenched at the cover of the nearest chest. A corner came away in his hands, the wood soft as cheese, the seeming metal a black smeary ooze. He struck at it again and sheared off most of the top, revealing a layer of dully-gleaming gold and slime-misted gems. Over that jeweled surface a crablike creature scuttled, escaping through a hole in the back.

With a great, greedy shout, the others rushed at the chests, jerking, gouging, even smiting with their swords at the spongy wood. Two, fighting as to which one should break open a certain chest, fell against it; and it went to pieces under them, leaving them struggling together in jewels and muck.

All this while Lavas Laerk stood on the same spot from which he had uttered his first taunting cry. To Fafhrd, who stood forgotten beside him, it seemed that Lavas Laerk was distraught that his quest should come to any end, that Lavas Laerk was desperately searching for something further, something more than jewels and gold to sate his mad willfulness. Then he noted that Lavas Laerk was looking at something intently—a square, slime-filmed, but apparently golden door across the room from the mouth of the corridor; upon it was the carving of some strange, undulant blanketlike sea monster. He heard Lavas Laerk laugh throatily, and watched him stride unswervingly toward the door. He saw that Lavas Laerk had something in his hand. With a shock of surprise he recognized it as the ring Lavas Laerk had taken from him. He saw Lavas Laerk shove at the door without budging it. He saw Lavas Laerk fumble with the ring and fit the key part into the golden door and turn it. He saw the door give a little to Lavas Laerk's next push.

Then he realized—and the realization came with an impact like a rushing wall of water—that nothing had happened accidentally, that everything,

from the moment his arrow struck the fish, had been intended by someone or something—something that wanted a door unlocked—and he turned and fled down the corridor as if a tidal wave were sucking at his heels.

The corridor, without torchlight, was pale and shifty as a nightmare. The phosphorescence seemed to crawl as if alive, revealing previously unspied creatures in every niche. Fafhrd stumbled, sprawled at full length, raced on. His fastest bursts of speed seemed slow as in a bad dream. He tried to look only ahead, but still glimpsed from the corners of his eyes every detail he had seen before; the trailing weeds, the monstrous carvings, the bearded shells, the sombrely staring octopus eyes. He noted without surprise that his feet and body glowed wherever the slime had splashed or smeared. He saw a small square of backness in the omnipresent phosphorescence and sprinted toward it. It grew in size. It was the cavern's portal. He plunged across the threshold into the night. He heard a voice calling his name.

It was the Gray Mouser's voice. It came from the opposite direction to the wrecked galley. He ran toward it across uneven treacherous rock ledges. Starlight, now come back, showed a black gulf before his feet. He leaped out, landed with a shaking impact on another rock surface, dashed forward without falling. He saw the top of a mast above an edge of blackness, and almost bowled over the small figure coming toward him. He ignored the Mouser's questions, seized him by the shoulder, dragged him with him to the edge, pulled him over forcibly. They clove the water together and swam out to the sloop anchored in the rock-sheltered lee. The Mouser started to heave at the anchor but Fafhrd slashed the line with a knife snatched from the Mouser's belt, and jerked up the sail in swift, swishing rushes.

Slowly the sloop began to move. Gradually the ripples became wavelets, and the wavelets became smacking waves. Then they slipped past a black, foam-edged sword of rock and were in the open sea. Still Fafhrd did not speak, but crowded on all canvas and did all else possible to coax speed from the storm-battered sloop. Resigned to mystification, the Mouser helped him.

They had not been long underway when the blow fell. The Mouser looking sternward, gave a hoarse, incredulous cry. The wave swiftly overtaking them was higher than the mast. And something was sucking the sloop back. The Mouser raised his arms shieldingly over his head. Then the sloop began to climb; up, up, up until it reached the top, overbalanced, and plummeted down the opposite side. The first wave was followed by a second, and a third, and a fourth, each almost as high. A larger boat would have surely been swamped. Finally the waves gave way to a choppy, foaming, unpredictable chaos, in which every ounce of effort and a thousand quick decisions were needed to keep the sloop afloat.

When the pale foredawn came, they were back on the homeward course again, a small improvised sail taking the place of the one ripped in the aftermath of the storm, enough water bailed from the hold to make the sloop seaworthy. Fafhrd, dazedly watching for the sunrise, felt weak as a woman. He only half heard the Mouser tell, in snatches, of how he had lost the galley in the storm, but followed what he guessed to be its general course until the storm cleared and he sighted the strange island and landed there, mistakenly believing it to be the galley's home port.

The Mouser then brought thin, bitter wine and salt fish, but Fafhrd pushed them away and said, "One thing I must know. I never looked back. But while we were getting out of the cove, I saw you stare long and earnestly at that accursed rock. What did you see?"

The Mouser shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. The distance was too great and the light was queer. What I thought I saw was rather foolish. I'd have given a good deal to have been closer." He frowned, shrugged his shoulders again. "Well, what I thought I saw was this. A crowd of men wearing big black cloaks—they looked like Northerners—came rushing out of an opening of some sort. There was something odd about them; the light by which I saw them didn't seem to have any source. Then they waved the big black cloaks around as if they were fighting with them or doing some sort of dance . . . I told you it was very foolish . . . and then they got down on their hands and knees and covered themselves up with the cloaks and crawled back into the place from which they had come. Now tell me I'm a liar."

Fafhrd shook his head. "Only those weren't cloaks," he said after a while in a small voice.

The Mouser began to sense that there was much more to it than he had even guessed. "What were they, then?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Fafhrd.

"But what was the place, then? I mean the island that almost sucked us down when it sank?"

"Simorgya," said Fafhrd, and lifted his head, and began to grin in a cruel, chilly, wild-eyed way that took the Mouser aback. "Simorgya," repeated Fafhrd, and pulled himself to the side of the boat and glared down at the rushing water. "Simorgya. And now it's sunk again. And, may it soak there forever, and rot in its own corruption, till all's muck!" He trembled spasmodically with the passion of his curse, then sank back. Along the rim of the east a ruddy smudge began to show.

THE END.

IN HIS OWN IMAGE

By Malcolm Jameson

The natives had an idol of a god—a bloodthirsty sort of fellow. The captain stole him—but no priests pursued. They knew their little godling—knew him better than the captain and his mate did—

Illustrated by Kramer

For all their bold and swaggering walk, there was something indefinitely furtive about the two men. Perhaps it was because one of them kept looking over his shoulder, or it may have been because the other kept sidling up to him as if better to conceal the suspicious bulge under his sailor's jacket.

They stopped at Market, with Howard Street and its flophouses and hiring halls behind them, and there they waited for the traffic lights to change with that air of mingled bewilderment and contempt that marks the deep sea man afoot in the heart of a great city. Traffic stopped and they struck on. In a few minutes they were climbing the low hill that leads to San Francisco's tawdry and synthetic Chinatown.

"'Tis behind Low Hing's joint," said the less stocky of the two—the crooked-nosed fellow wearing the cap of a mate. "So said that remittance man I talked with at Noumea."

"Aye," grunted the captain,

They turned into a side street and presently stopped at an alley mouth. The captain glanced about, then led the way into the rough-cobbled canyon. Its dingy brick walls were plastered with tattered posters of red covered with black Chinese characters. From above and to the left came the squeal and clatter of Chinese music, and the occasional boom of a temple gong. In the inner court they found there were doors giving access to rickety staircases.

At the top of the first dusty flight the captain kicked a China boy out of his way with a heavy curse, then turned to find the second stairs. On the third floor there was no sign of life, only a trash-littered narrow hall more appropriate to a long-abandoned house. But at one end of it there was a door, and across its flimsy panels was the crudely scrawled sign in peeling paint:

IDOLS, AMULETS and CHARMS
Bought, Sold and Exchanged.

The captain did not hesitate, but thrust the door open. A high-pitched bell tinkled within, and the two men found themselves confronting an ancient counter backed by bare shelves. Farther behind, half concealed by a dirty cotton curtain, half drawn, a bald-headed, bearded old man sat on a stool. In his lap was a grotesque wooden image, and he appeared to be lost in the study of certain strange scribblings incised in its base. All about him stood other monstrous and distorted figures—of wood, of bronze, of stone. They were of all sizes and shapes. There were multiple-armed and many-eyed ones, with faces that scowled or grinned abominably. Some were animal-headed, but all were loathsome and abounded in obscene detail.

If the proprietor of the queer shop heard the bell or the heavy-footed entry of the two seafaring men, he gave no sign of it. He continued to pore over the inscriptions on the lewd figure he was holding.

"Well?" snarled the captain, drawing forth his paper-wrapped bundle and setting it down on the counter with a bang. The old man took a full minute before he turned his head and shot a cold and indifferent glance toward his callers. Then he laid aside the idol he had been studying and came slowly to the counter. He fixed a pair of glittering eyes on the hard, scarred face of the captain, then waited.

"You make gods?" inquired the seaman, and mentioned as reference the name of a malodorous character known from Paumoto to the Gulf of Huon. The leathery skin of the captain was almost black from a lifetime's exposure to the tropic sun.

The ancient shopkeeper threw back his head and laughed, cynically and with pointed scorn. The master of the auxiliary schooner *Lapuu* scowled.

"Men make their own gods," cackled the old man after a pause. "It is faith that does it." He resumed his probing of the hard, salt-bitten faces

before him. Then he let his eyes drop and touch for a moment the package on the counter. "But," he added, "sometimes, if the pay is right—and I choose—I cut a statue."

The captain of the *Lapuu* tore the wrappings from the parcel he had brought. What he revealed was unspeakably hideous, the creation of some drug-maddened savage—a stone monstrosity with a double head that bore but a single eye. Its many pairs of arms gestured variously, beseechingly, threateningly, and otherwise in ways that had best not be told. There was a vital cruelty about the thing that was shocking.

"We want one like that, only bigger and better," said the captain.

The dealer in idols studied the frightful creation and noted the shape and depth of the offering bowl that the fiendish figure held in its all but nethermost pair of hands.

"This is a very evil thing," muttered the old man, picking up the small statue and turning it over and over in his hands. His manner of handling the vile object was familiar yet cautious, as those wise in the ways of serpents handle venomous snakes. "It has been stolen, too."

"Aye, no doubt," said the captain hastily, "but not by me."

As he spoke, the memory leaped into his brain of the little sloop falling away astern of the *Lapuu,* and of the white man in it, lying face up to the staring sun of the South Sea, and of the fresh red gash under his chin and cheeks, and more of the same red splashing on the grating beneath him. A stranger, that man had been. He had come alongside pleading huskily for water and holding out a handful of pearls as the price he was willing to pay for it. And the captain remembered also the quarrel he had had with his mate—the former one, not this dumb pick-up at his side—over the division of the spoils. The mate claimed that having done the dirty work, he was entitled to a full share of the profit. That mate had died that same night in a way not accurately stated in the log.

"I came by it by inheritance, so to speak," explained the captain, without the alteration of a single line of his granite face, and all the time gazing hard with his steely eyes into the piercing stare of the other. "But I know, from my knowledge of such things, where it came from, and I mean to return it. Those who once owned it are many and unforgiving. They will demand tenfold if I am to have their friendship. That is why I must take back a really first-class god—one with a brilliant eye, not a bit of glass, and with silver and jade ornaments, and of ebony, not cheap red stone like this."

"I tell you, I make no gods," snarled the surly old man. "People do that for themselves." He pushed the small idol away from him, but his eyes continued to bore into the ruthless face across the counter from him. The captain smiled faintly. Then he pulled a chamois bag from a pocket and loosened the string at its throat.

"Let that be as it may be," he said softly. "Let

us call it a statue, then, but it must be four feet high and of such materials as I have mentioned."

"You have asked it," stated the old idol maker, dropping his eyes as if satisfied with his scrutiny. He shot one swift glance at the crooked-nosed mate, then held out his hand toward the captain, palm up.

The captain silently began counting out pearls into the outstretched hand of the dealer in outlandish gods. A score the old man took, of the finest, before he closed his fingers and signified it was sufficient.

"My work," muttered the craftsman, "will be done one week from Friday. The rest you must do yourselves."

"Bah!" snorted the captain, and turned on his heel, beckoning the mate to follow. They thundered down the stairs and out into the filthy court.

Above them, in the workshop of the idol vender, the old craftsman was pottering among his tools and chuckling as he poked about. There was a gleam of strange satisfaction in those eyes that could see more than was meant for them. He selected a choice chunk of ebony and laid it to one side.

"Ah, a masterful man, that captain! Gods or statues, it is all one to him." He picked up a mallet and a small chisel and went to work. "But the gods, in their own way," he mused, "are just."

The *Lapuu,* as befitted her business, was small. The cargo she sought was compact and of great value, and often lay behind thunderous reefs of wave-swept shoals. There were but four in her crew, Kanakas all, and each voyage saw new faces. There were whispers in the islands concerning the high mortality on the tiny trader, but in certain waters men do not speak too openly about things. It is unwise to make charges without proof, and things are hard to prove without witnesses. Though many Kanakas—and mates—had shipped, first and last, on the little *Lapuu,* no man knew of his own knowledge of a single one who had been paid off. In none of the archipelagos could a man be found who had sailed in the *Lapuu.*

When San Francisco lay twenty-eight days astern, the captain had a certain crate brought from the hold. The installation of the newest embodiment of the Great Spirit of Tana Lipa on a sort of throne in the cabin shared by the two whites was the captain's own idea. Whether the cowing of the crew was part of the idea is something that only the captain could have told. At any rate, as the packing and dunnage fell away, the Kanakas fled howling to the fo'c's'le and huddled there, whimpering, despite the angry orders and kicks showered on them by the mate. One set up a singsong monologue of propitiation.

"You'll have to finish the job yourself, mister," remarked the captain dryly from the low poop. "They're scared of the brute."

If the idol's prototype had seemed malevolent, its enlargement exuded fiendishness unspeakable. If those who hold that art is the statement of the quintessence of things are right, then the maker of that ugly figure must be reckoned as among the great masters. For unmistakable greed, lust, and sadism fairly glowed in the sensual lines and masses of the ebony torso and in the postures of the multipaired arms and legs. Some of the hands held weapons, some were clinched as if in anger, others beckoned, while some struck out with clawed talons. Yet the trunk and its unholy appendages were but accessories to the whole, topped as it was by that bifurcated head bearing its single ominous, commanding eye. Smoldering, implacable hatred and insatiable desire, if human terms may be employed in the description of an expression so inhuman, was what that leering, glassy eye conveyed. Even the mate shuddered as he beheld it when he drew back from having driven home the last screw that secured it to its new pedestal. He carefully shut the door before ascending to the poop.

The mate soon had reason enough to hate that repulsive idol even as it appeared to hate him. Fat Tom, the cabin boy and cook, steadfastly refused to enter the cabin after he had looked once upon the monstrous figure and fled, gibbering, out into the waist. Neither curses nor flogging nor threats of punishment more dire could induce him to set foot again inside. The upshot of it was the mate had to make the bunks and serve the meals himself. And as if that were not enough, the hitherto even tenor of their leisurely voyage began to be interrupted. Little things happened, none of them of great moment, but each adding to his growing irritation.

The steady, even breeze that had wafted them along so smoothly died. In its place came days of dead calm, punctuated by sudden squalls that seemed to come from nowhere and go as quick whence they had come. The crew worked sullenly and apathetically, as if they already knew the ship was foredoomed and that nothing that anyone did could be of use. Blocks jammed unaccountably, and running gear, even the newest and best stuff, parted without cause or warning. The compass card wandered at random in the binnacle until the captain himself cursed it heartily and thereafter had to depend upon the stars when he could see them.

But it was the mate who, as these accidents persisted, more and more often cast worried, surreptitious glances at the horrid creation squatting on its fantastic pedestal against the bulkhead. One night as he and the captain ate in dogged silence, the mate felt he could endure it no more. In a half-strangled voice he blurted out, "That thing

gives me the creeps! It wants something!" and the captain laughed harshly and cursed him for being a superstitious fool. The mate, thus reproved and secretly ashamed of his momentary fear, kept his mouth shut thereafter. Like his captain, it had been his boast that he feared neither devil nor man. But though he could control his tongue, he could not altogether quell the uneasiness within him. It was all very well, he would say to himself, that these accidents are coincidences, but—

"Pah!" sneered the captain, as if aware of his thoughts. "A thing, a doll—no more—made by a doddering numskull in a dive in 'Frisco! 'Tis a toy with which to swindle stupid savages. Think of the pearls we'll get, man. Will not that pay for all your silly tooth chattering and the extra work you gripe about?"

But after that, the captain, too—when no one was looking—would stare thoughtfully at the ugly statue. A thorough scoundrel, he had never been permitted to live long in any one country. Consequently he had sojourned in many places and he had seen and scoffed at many such puppets, whatever their form. In this country they worshiped such and such a symbol, in that, another, but to his mind it all came to the same thing. Mankind, he thought—and his lip curled in scorn—were the gulls of priests.

Yet even as he sneered in the fullness of his contempt, a vague apprehension shook him. Unreasoning fools though he thought those others were, a wave of doubt suddenly rippled through him and his spine tingled just a little bit as he gazed into that single baleful eye. Could it be that after all there was something in this priest business? So many millions—

There came a night when the wind howled and the schooner plunged frantically about in a raging sea. But it was not so bad a night that the mate could not carry on alone, so he clung to the wheel on the wind-swept poop and held the *Lapuu* on her course as best he could, trusting that the scrap of a staysail would stay on her. Below, in his bunk, the captain lay and idly watched the play of light in the cabin as the fitful lightning crackled outside. He was tired, for the day had been a hard one, and he dozed from time to time, but the jerky motion of the tiny ship and the violence of the thunder made sound sleep impossible.

It was on his second or third awakening that he first noted the horrid glintings in the eye of the image, and his heart froze within him. With his eyes fairly starting from their sockets, he sat bolt upright in his bunk and stared. He would have sworn that he knew the trick of that cleverly designed eye—a ball of rose quartz cunningly hollowed at the back to admit the insertion of small emerald and diamond chips. But no! Now it was a thing of living fire, pulsating, opalescent fire; the eye of a fiend, fixed upon him with a malignant intentness that chilled him to the bone.

And then the cruel arms began to weave about in a devilish rhythm that set his pulses pounding. He tried to tell himself it was the shadows dancing, but as the last flash of lightning died he saw there were no shadows. The frightful creature gleamed with an unholy radiance all its own. And as he looked, the hideous idol seemed to grow until it loomed gigantic and menacing and filled half the tiny room. That, and what followed, drove the captain shrieking, clambering, clawing—out into the storm.

The mate, his drawn face thrust into the whipping rain, clung to the rail above and stared wild-eyed into the storm-racked sea. In the lulls in the fanfare of thunder he had heard the whimperings in the cabin below, but it was that ultimate soul-chilling scream of his captain that bereft him of the shred of sanity left him. Now they were mocking, taunting voices in the winds; the scudding clouds were monsters—appalling, gesturing shapes barely glimpsed in the flickering light. The howling tempest was itself an evil entity, implacable and furious, bellowing harsh threats. The mate strained, listening, and did not know his hair was whitening.

Once, in a dazzling burst of electric fire, he caught sight of his captain, crawling forward on hands and knees, and heard him whining like a whipped dog. Again a lightning flash revealed him farther forward, crouching beside the little shack improvised of battens, fumbling with the door that kept their few remaining animals penned in. The mate averted his eyes and stared stonily at the wild ocean. In his own agony, it was nothing to him if the Malign One chose to make a beast of his skipper. Let him go live with the goat and the chickens if that was the Great Spirit of Tana Lipa's will. In dealing with that black, one-eyed devil, each must make what bargain he could.

The dawn came at last, gray and blustery, but there followed shortly a marked abatement of the gale. To the astonishment of the mate the captain suddenly appeared at the top of the ladder, hard and swaggering as was his customary carriage.

"Get forward, mister, and set more sail," he ordered curtly. Then he turned, as if he had forgotten all about the *Lapuu,* and began gazing ahead as if lost in a rosy dream. The mate, frozen faced and unspeaking, stumbled forward to rout out the cowering crew.

Later, when his work was done, some weird fascination drew him irresistibly toward the cabin. The captain, lost in reverie, did not appear to be aware of his coming aft, or of his going down into the cabin under him.

The mate entered the chamber of horrors with

fear and trembling, but the mysterious force that drew him was so compelling that he could do no other. It was some time before he could bring himself to lift his eyes to the hideous image that sat enthroned there, but when he did he began to understand why the deck of the cabin was strewn with blood-tipped feathers. With a thrill of horror, he looked upon the litter of bloody fragments that almost filled the bowl clutched by that all but nethermost pair of vile hands. He saw the torn entrails heaped there and the small heart that adorned the apex of the nauseous heap of offal, and the full measure of terror seized him. Despairing, he raised his eyes still farther until he met the steady, insatiable gaze of that one glittering eye. It was then that it was his turn to cry out and prostrate himself before the lewd demon in the manner he thought would be the most pleasing to it.

"I will, O Great One, I will!" he whimpered. "Time—give me a little time. I did not know." And he fell to sobbing.

But outside, in the bracing sunshine and the mild breeze that had succeeded the gale, the shuddering mate regained some control of himself. He glanced uneasily aft to where the captain still stood, looking ahead as if in a trance. The mate hesitated. It was all so unreal—he must have dreamed—he must not—

"Who knows?" he suddenly whispered to himself as he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. "There is no harm in playing safe." And he went on forward, thinking of how to get the goat into the cabin without being noticed by the captain.

Hours later he climbed anew to the poop. He was calmer then—not serene, but at least at something like peace with himself and his diabolical master below. He slid noiselessly to his place by the taffrail and thoughtfully regarded the red caked under the ends of his broken fingernails, then he looked up at the back of his captain's head.

"After all, it was only a chicken's heart *he* gave," he muttered hoarsely, and he looked upon the master of the *Lapuu* with an emotion that was not far from pity.

The day wore on without incident. Though the gate to the animal pen yawned open for all to see, and no animal appeared on deck, neither of the two white men noticed it. Or if they noticed, they did not see fit to speak of it. After the first exchange of words in the morning, neither spoke to the other, nor appeared to see.

But night came, and it was the captain's turn to stand the first watch. The mate, fearing to profane the temple the cabin had now become, slept elsewhere—well forward, on deck, abreast the foremast. To his astonishment, the fresh dawn found him where he had laid his mattress the night before. The captain had not called him for the midwatch!

He sat upright and called for Fat Tom and coffee. But there was no answering cry or patter of feet. He looked forward to where the crew hung out, but there were only three men there—the deckhands. Fat Tom must be aft. The mate got up and walked toward the poop, calling again for the unseen cook.

As he approached he saw the captain standing with his feet widespread and glaring at him with his old-time arrogance.

"Get your own breakfast," snarled the captain.

"I want Fat Tom," persisted the mate. Why should this mad captain be permitted to bully him so? Hadn't he, the mate, sacrificed a goat instead of a mere chicken? By rights, he should be captain of the ship, if favor counted.

"Go get him, then," he said, waving an arm back toward the foamy wake. "He's back there."

On the instant the mate's appetite for food was gone. Sullenly and almost blindly he mounted to the poop and took the wheel. He watched with vicious envy as the captain blustered forward, storming and cursing the natives who scurried ahead of him, trying to elude his blows. The mate knew he had been beaten, outwitted. He had snatched one peaceful night—the first in many—and now he must go back to the other way, the way of anxiety and dread and nameless fears. He had been outbid. First chicken, then goat, now man! That was the utmost. The captain was the favorite.

For half an hour the captain raved and swore up forward, and every minute of that half-hour saw the mate's despair grow blacker. In the end it became absolute. Nothing—not anything—could be worse. Life was unbearable. The mate slipped a quick lashing on the wheel, and like a ghost vanished down the ladder.

It was indeed an angry god he looked upon. The bowl was heaped high and overflowed with dreadful things, but the idol still sat with unsated stare. It had a satisfactory offering, it was true, but only from one man. There lived others under his spell. The single flashing, bloodshot eye seemed to drill the mate through and through. He fell to the deck and groveled, mumbling and begging to be told what he should do. After a long time his moans ceased, and he rose stiffly, like an automaton.

"White it shall be," he said between his teeth.

The captain's resolute, overbearing stride could be heard outside, each step louder than the one before. He was coming aft. The mate stood just inside the door, his weapon ready in his hand. On the fo'c's'le three dark-skinned men set up a mournful chant, swelling louder and louder as they sang.

THE END.

AT LAST

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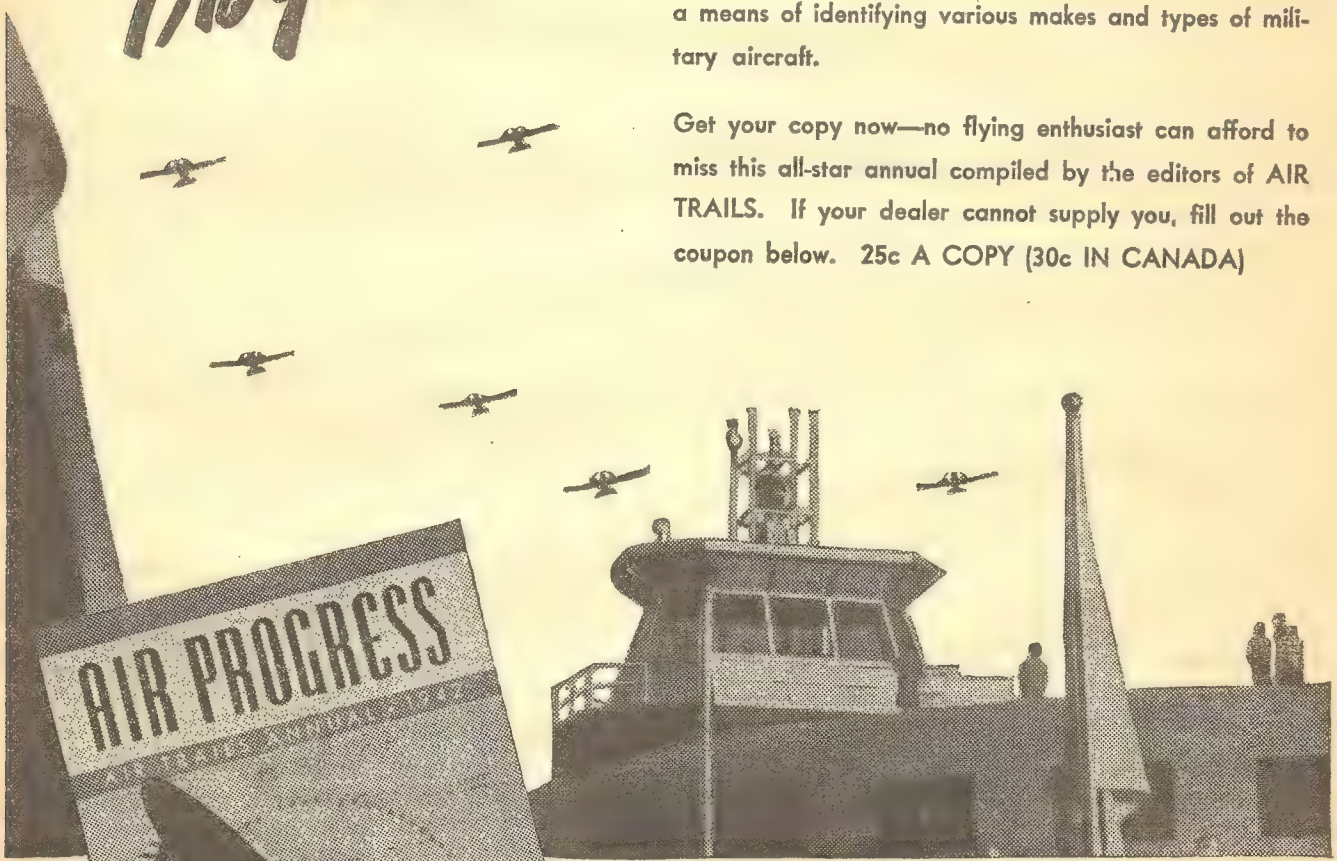

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BOOK REVIEW

THE OTHER WORLDS, edited by Phil Stong; New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc.; 1941; 466 pp.; $2.50.

A well-known author of rustic American novels, who is also, it seems, one of us fans, has compiled this anthology of fantastic short stories. I recommend it, with some reservations, for immediate and permanent addition to the fantasy reader's library. I recommend it because: it contains a number of good, forceful, entertaining stories; it includes several stories that have not been published in any of the regular science-fiction and/or fantasy pulps; it will preserve some of your favorite stories in more durable form than that of a file of unbound magazines; finally, it is a lot of book for the money.

The reservations are as follows: the compilation of any anthology presents certain inherent difficulties to which Mr. Stong is as liable as anybody else. One is that it is never possible to make the book big enough to contain everybody's favorites. The other is that tastes differ.

In his humorous foreword, Mr. Stong gives a survey of the fantasy field and explains his selections. He does not appear to draw the sharp distinction between fantasy and science-fiction that distinguishes the stories of Unknown from those of *Astounding:* that the former shall be impossible and the latter merely improbable or highly speculative. (By "impossible" I mean impossible from the point of view of a materialist who does not believe in the supernatural.) Mr. Stong does start out by saying that "The first requirement of a good fantastic story . . . is that it should not be even remotely possible." That sounds like my definition of "fantasy" above, but then Mr. Stong goes and includes several science-fiction stories, such as a robot story and a couple of time-travel stories, which to my mind belong in the science-fiction or merely improbable category.

The editor does, however, exclude interplanetaries on the ground that most of them are tripe. As he puts it: "They fall into several classes: (1) Scientific monsters from Mars or Sirius, attempting to conquer Earth, are frustrated, a la Wells, by the local fauna—in the person of a very young scientist who has made a necessary weapon at just the right moment, after all the millennia; (2) World's first interplanetary travelers land on the Moon or some planet and find the beautiful Queen Goop in desperate straits because of the rebellion of the lustful, black-browed Duke Quork and his legions of trained gesundheits, something like dinosaurs and something like burned-leather pillowcases celebrating the original Chicago World's Fair. The young leader of the Earthmen conquers Quork in about fifty pages and marries Goop; (3) the youngest lieutenant of the Interplanetary Police has trouble with pirates; (4) a spaceship hits a cosmic rift and slides into the Fourth Dimension with subsequent developments of (1), (2), or/and (3)."

This is not entirely just, as witness such an original handling of the interplanetary theme as that of Heinlein's recent "Universe." On the other hand, there is enough truth in it to make unjustified the entirely antagonistic attitude taken by Mr. Donald Wollheim in a recent review of "The Other Worlds." Sure, most interplanetaries are tripe. So what? Most love, Western, detective, sport, adventure, railroad, sea, jungle, and war stories are likewise tripe—to me, that is—not to mention that hardy perennial of the slicks, rising-young-businessman-hornswoggler-competitor-and-marries-his-secretary. What do you want for your nickel, Tolstoy? And at their worst the horse-operas-in-space have, to my way of thinking, more verve and originality than most of the other kinds mentioned.

But to get to the actual stories of the anthology: there are three sections; the first, "Strange Ideas," is distinguished by Lord's "Naked Lady" and Everett's "The Woman in Gray," which to my mind have the most oomph of the nine stories in the group; they are short, simple and carry a wallop. The section includes Farley's strange *tour de force,* "The House of Ecstasy," which, as far as I know, is the only story ever written in the second person. Del Rey's "The Pipes of Pan," I think, deserves honorable mention.

The second section, "Fresh Variants," comprises eight stories of which about half are definitely science-fiction. Personally, I most enjoyed Lenister's "The Fourth-Dimensional Demonstrator"—reread after all these years—and Kent's—Kuttner's—"The Comedy of Eras." They are both slapstick comedy, but then I like some slapstick—e. g., the Marx Brothers—and so do not consider that fact an adverse criticism. As runners-up I should class Sturgeon's "A God in a Garden" and Lord's "A Problem for Biographers." I am puzzled by the inclusion of Binder's "Adam Link's Vengeance"; if Stong wanted a story by Binder, Otto has done much better work; if he wanted a robot story, there have been vastly better robot stories, notably some of Asimov's recent ones. But there again it's a matter of taste.

Part Three, "Horrors," is straight creepy-crawlies, through which I got about halfway. It begins with Lovecraft's "In the Vault." As Mr. Stong notes in his preface to the section—Mr. Stong's prefaces are as entertaining as the stories—Lovecraft imitated the style of Poe with the fidelity wherewith A. D. Howden Smith imitates Stevenson. Personally, I like Poe's genteel, pedantic manner; it forms such a lovely contrast to Poe's and Lovecraft's grisly subject matter. This particular story, though, I should rate as so-so. The next, Wellman's "School for the Unspeakable," is Wellman at his best, which is very good indeed; it has originality and a complete lack of that straining for effect which makes the third story, Quinn's "The House Where Time Stood Still," unintentionally funny. Wellman has a second contribution, "Song of the Slaves," which, though well-written, unfortunately telegraphs its terminal punch on the second page.

One last, and minor, complaint: in the list of acknowledgments to various magazines in which the stories have appeared, the name of Unknown is missing, though several of the stories are from that source.

J. Wellington Wells.

DESIGN FOR DREAMING

By Henry Kuttner

● A Hollywood script writer has a tough time, nervously speaking. And when a magician sends him to the world where the scripts for dreams are written instead of to the Elysian Fields for a vacation—the imagination-peddler has recourse!

Illustrated by M. Isip

Too much Hollywood was the cause. The result, for Timothy Macklin, screen writer, was a severe case of practically psychopathic jitters. His thin, intense face grew thinner, he smoked innumerable cigarettes, and he found himself quivering like jelly each morning when he drove to his office on the Summit Studio lot.

The cure was obvious, of course. Macklin's physician sent him to a psychologist, who advised rest and a change of scene. The writer got a leave of absence, thumbed through a sheaf of travel folders, and then telephoned Betsi Gardner, the columnist. Nobody in Hollywood made a move without notifying

Betsi. It just wasn't done.

"Hello, rat," the lady said companionably. "What's up? You missed the shindig last night at Laguna. Jumping catfish, have I got a hangover."

"I got worse than that," Macklin remarked. "I'm a fugitive from a nervous breakdown. My doctor just told me to make tracks."

"So? That's worth a stick or two. Where're you going?"

"Dunno. Got any suggestions?"

"I've one," Betsi said slowly, "but you'd better not laugh. Go see Jerome Dunn."

"Who's he?"

"You must have been hibernating for the last few months, Tim. I know Dunn hasn't been in the papers, but you must have heard about him on the grapevine. He's the boy Hollywood goes to see now. Cures anything from mumps to unrequited love."

"What's his racket?" Macklin inquired.

"He's a—magician," Betsi said. "A sorcerer. Shut up and listen. I'm not kidding. The guy's got something. His love philters really work." She chuckled at some stray thought. "Matter of fact, there's a certain producer who's got a curse on him now. He doesn't know what's wrong, but he's suddenly developed a dozen or so phobias. He [illegible] one of his directors, and the director went to see Dunn. Figure it out."

"What's the rib?" Macklin grunted.

Betsi sighed. "Skeptical so-and-so, aren't you? O. K. Don't believe me. Just go see Dunn, tell him I sent you, and see what happens. Better have your check book along. Here's his address. Luck!"

"Thanks," the writer said, and hung up. He reached for a decanter, changed his mind, and turned to view his apartment. It was filled with luggage. Certainly it was high time for Macklin to get tickets for wherever he was going. Oh, well—

He took a drink. He really didn't want to go anywhere. Except, maybe, a South Sea island without telephone facilities. But the prospect of seeing his luggage safely on board the boat was definitely unpleasant. Macklin wanted to relax. His mind was racing like an outboard motor in air. He kept visualizing Summit Studios, Hollywood's special madhouse.

Ugh!

Well, what about Jerome Dunn? The guy was a faker, obviously, but perhaps he had something on the ball. Possibly he was a hypnotist. Mesmerism might be the exact thing Macklin needed. On an impulse, he donned a hat, went downstairs, and hailed a taxi, giving the address Betsi had mentioned.

Twenty minutes later he climbed a steep gravel walk in the heart of the Hollywood hills, toward a comfortable-looking bungalow of white stucco which nestled amid yew trees. A card above the push button said, Jerome Dunn, Consulting Sorcerer." His finger aimed and ready, Macklin hesitated, listening. A high-pitched, rather tuneless voice was singing from within the house.

"If you want a proud foe to make tracks—
If you'd melt a rich uncle in wax—
You've but to look in
On our resident Djinn,
Number seventy, Simmery Axe—"

Macklin rolled up his eyes and rang the bell. Instantly the door swung open. On the threshold was standing a fat little man with an extraordinarily sharp, pointed nose, which quivered slightly as though with excitement. Mr. Dunn wore a faded dressing gown, moth-eaten carpet slippers, and an expression of violent greed.

"A customer!" he said, his plump cheeks bouncing. "Come in! Oh, wonderful! I shall soon have more money!"

"Uh—" Macklin gulped, taken by surprise. The little man was unorthodox, even for Hollywood. But Dunn seized the other's arm and dragged him across the threshold.

"Oh, fine, fine!" he gurgled happily. "I love money. You'll pay me for my services, won't you? You're not . . . not a deadbeat?" His beady little eyes darkened with a sudden suspicion. "You have money? Answer me?"

"Yes. But that doesn't mean you're going to get any of it. You're Jerome Dunn?"

"Me! Oh, yes. Sit down. It's wonderful to be a magician. I get so much money—sit down, please!"

Carefully Macklin lowered himself into a chair and stared around. The room looked perfectly ordinary. A lounge, a center table with a bowl of wax fruit upon it, some bad pictures on the wall—bad in the artistic sense, Macklin thought regretfully—and the usual arrangement of carpet, lamps, and bric-a-brac. Everything was slightly greasy.

"Yes," Dunn said, "very greasy. It's the smoke. The nasty stuff I have to burn sometimes before the demons will appear! My! And then things go wrong so often." He sighed. "But it isn't my fault. Think something!" he ended urgently.

"Huh?" Macklin's eyes widened.

Dunn beamed. "No, I'm not crazy. See? I'm reading your mind. I'm clever—a real magician. Who are you?"

"If you're such a swell magician, you ought to know without asking me. My name's Timothy Macklin. Betsi Gardner suggested I see you."

"Why?"

For answer Macklin took out a complete medical report—X rays and all—and handed them to Dunn, who examined the material with interest. "I see. Neuroses. And—"

"You any good at hypnotism?"

"Wonderful," Dunn said firmly. "But—"

"No buts. That's what I need. Something to soothe my mind—to make me forget all this merry-go-round. Adaptations, continuities, screen credits, directors, producers—I'm fed up. I need a rest. When I came to Hollywood, I figured I could make dough. I have. But I'm going rapidly nuts. Have you ever been in a movie studio, Dunn?"

The magician shuddered. "I've heard stories. What you need, Mr. Macklin, is a drink."

"I've tried that—"

"Of Lethe."

"Never tried *that*," Macklin said. "But . . . huh?"

"Lethe," Dunn explained, "is the Water of Forgetfulness. You don't want too much of it, of course. A few sips once in a while. The Water will lull you . . . you won't have a bit of trouble with nerves. See?"

"I'll try anything once," Macklin agreed wearily. "How much is it by the quart?"

"You'll have to go after it," Dunn said. "Lethean Water can't be taken out of the Greek Hades. They're very strict about that. Lethe's a river, you know—it flows past the Elysian Fields. I've been there. Nice place, but pretty dead. I jest," he added hastily. "Get it?"

"No," said Macklin, slightly confused.

"You wanted a trip—well, I'll throw that in free of charge. You'll have to go get the Lethe yourself. I can send you to the Elysian Fields, and, once you're there, you can just take it easy. Drink Lethe whenever you like, and, after you're completely rested, come back to Earth. That's simple, isn't it?

"Sure. But now let's talk sense. What—"

Dunn jumped up, rummaged in a cupboard, and came back with two small rolls of parchment. "Here are your tickets. One will take you to the Elysian Fields and the other will bring you back here. I guarantee the cure. I won't tell you how to use the scrips till you write me a check. Five thousand dollars, please. Jerome Dunn, with a J."

Macklin wrote the check, wondering why he did so. He couldn't think clearly. This excitable little man was like a cricket rasping on his nerves. But maybe Dunn could cure him. Magic, of course, was out, but—this was probably a psychological build-up to the hypnotic angle. Moreover, Macklin thoughtfully postdated the check by a few days. No use to take chances.

Dunn didn't notice. He seized the check, gloated over it, and practically licked it. Then he thrust it into a capacious wallet and sighed happily.

"Just burn one of the scrips," he said. "Keep the other handy. Don't lose it. When you're ready to come back, burn *that*. Simple, isn't it?"

Macklin said, "Yeah," and sat looking at the two rolls of parchment. He opened one, to find its surface covered with cryptic heiroglyphics in red ink.

"Well, burn it," Dunn said. "Got a cigarette lighter?"

Macklin nodded, thumbed a flame, and applied it to one of the parchments. Instantly the thing sizzled and melted in his hand, sending up a thick cloud of greasy, black smoke. Macklin cursed, jumped up and shook his hand, which had been burned. He coughed rackingly, his eyes stinging. The smoke was so thick he couldn't see Dunn, seated across from him.

Gradually it cleared away. Macklin took one look and closed his eyes in shocked disbelief. Hypnotism. That's what it was. He *couldn't* be standing in a . . . a room where everything was—*floating*.

"Hi!" said a shrill voice. "A rookie, huh? Where's that phone? Tassle your ears, Snule, where is it?"

"Here, Broscop," came a deeper reply. "By the chandelier. What world is he from? Mars or Valhalla, I'll bet."

Macklin opened his eyes. He was in an office. It wasn't quite a normal office. The chief reason was that everything was floating in midair. A heavy mahogany desk was angled up near the ceiling, and chairs were drifting about in a confused fashion. The carpet looked like something out of the Arabian Nights. And the two occupants of the room were also afloat.

One was a very small green man, with pointed ears and no clothes. The other was a merman, with gills, weed-green hair, and a tapering fish tail.

"Emergency," said the green man into a telephone slightly smaller than himself. "I don't care! So they're all at a preview—did I send 'em there? It's a rookie—yeah. O. K. We will. Doing anything tonight, blondie?" He hung up with a tiny sigh. "One of Queen Mab's girls. I could go for her."

"You'd best get back to work," growled the merman. "This dream's got to be past the censors by four o'clock. It's a super-special."

"Dream," Macklin remarked incoherently. "That's it. I'm dreaming. Or else I've gone off my crock." He clawed at a drifting chair and found himself somersaulting in midair. When he recovered, the merman had swum forward to face him.

"Cool off," the creature advised. "This isn't a dream. It's the place where they make dreams. You'll get used to it after a while."

"I . . . *ugg*—"

"I," said the green man, "am Broscop. A leprechaun. This merlad here is Snule. We're collaborating just now. Your name is—"

"Timothy Macklin," the other said automatically. "It's all right. I'm crazy. I must be. D-does everything float around this way all the time?"

Broscop laughed shrilly. "Of course not. We were getting in the mood for a flying dream. We're working on a weightless sequence—it'll go to a Jovian eventually, for its first showing. I dunno where the second run will be. Here!" He swam to the wall, pushed a few buttons, and the furniture slowly sank back to a more usual position. So did Macklin and his two odd companions. The merman curled himself into a curious chair shaped to accommodate his nether extremity. Broscop perched on the edge of the desk.

"Sit down and take it easy," he advised. "You're new here, and that's always tough. Wait'll you see the director, though! He'll set you right."

"Tough on the kid," the merman rumbled.

Broscop nodded. "Yeah, it's Old Growly this week, isn't it? He's a hard case. Come on, Timothy Macklin. You're in the army now."

"B-but—"

The leprechaun jumped down from the desk, reached up to clutch one of Macklin's fingers, and urged him to the door. "Come on!" he commanded.

Outside was a brightly lighted corridor, quite empty. Little Broscop said in an undertone, "I'll look out for you, lad. Snule's just dyspeptic. Bad tempered—all mermen are. Now listen, Timothy Macklin—you've gotta go see Old Growly. Play along with him. He likes yes-men. I'll pull some wires and get you assigned to working on a dream with me. I'll show you the ropes. Here's the place. Good luck."

Macklin found himself entering a gigantic office. The door closed behind him; Broscop was gone. He looked across several acres of bare, gleaming desk, at a gentleman with horns.

Old Growly was a repulsively fat creature with the plated dark skin of an alligator, a bulldog face, and two stubby horns that grew in the conventional place. He slammed huge fists on the desk and bellowed, "You're Timothy Macklin! I'll tell you right now that I can't afford to waste time. Shut up and listen!"

Macklin found himself growing angry. Even in a madman's dream, he had his rights. He said so. Old Growly wasn't listening.

"You're assigned to dream-making. Now listen! Where do you suppose dreams come from?"

"The subconscious," Macklin said automatically.

Old Growly seemed slightly taken aback. "All right," he said at last. "But it isn't like taking rabbits out of a hat. Dreams are written, see? We've got a whole crew of workers framing 'em up. And we never have enough writers on the job. We gotta supply the whole universe, and population keeps increasing. So we get recruits all

the time. We got scouts out looking for likely talent. When they find a good prospect, they sign him up. Who signed you up? Belphegor's covering Earth this month—it was him, huh?"

"It was *he*," Macklin corrected instinctively. "I mean it wasn't he. Nobody signed me up."

"Trying to reneg, huh? We got your John Henry on the contract—"

"John Hancock."

"Shut up!" screamed the infuriated creature behind the desk. "Don't go correcting what I say! Blood of Cain, for two pins I'd assign you to the nightmare department! Just remember this, Mr. Timothy Macklin—you're a cog in a big machine here. Just a cog, that's all. And I'm your boss. What I say goes."

"Now wait a minute," Macklin interrupted. "Even if this is a dream, I want to set you right on a few things. Nobody signed me up to anything. I don't understand the set-up here, and I don't want to."

"By Father Satan," said Old Growly softly, "you do talk big, don't you? Well, you'll learn—you'll learn. Now listen, once and for all. This is the dimension of the dream-makers. It's the place where the dreams are manufactured for every intelligent being in the universe. Belphegor saw you, signed you up, and you're here, like it or not. And you're going to get to work here and like it!"

"And I tell you I don't know anybody named Belphegor," Macklin snapped. "A guy named Dunn sent me here. He—"

"Well?"

"Why . . . uh . . . nothing." Macklin was staring at the parchment roll he still clutched in his left hand. The return ticket—

Suppose Dunn actually was a magician? Suppose—then something must have gone wrong. Macklin had landed in the wrong dimension. Instead of going to the Elysian Fields, he had arrived here.

But he still had the return ticket! Hastily Macklin snatched out his cigarette lighter. The flame didn't spring into existence the first time he tried it. Before he could make another attempt, a burly thunderbolt had hurled itself across the desk and seized the scrip.

"What's this?" Old Growly snarled, examining the parchment. "Magic?"

"Give me that!" Macklin tried to recover the lost scrip. The other held him back with one long arm.

"I thought so," Old Growly nodded. "A spell. Satan knows what! Well, it's against the rules to work magic here. You'll learn to obey the rules, Mr. Timothy Macklin." So saying, he crumpled the parchment into a ball, thrust it into his capacious mouth, and ate it.

"Only way to get rid of spells," he said inarticulately. "Burn 'em and . . . *mph* . . . never know what'll happen. Now you get to work or I'll give you a week's leave in Hell."

Macklin breathed hoarsely. "You . . . you—"

"Shut up, see? I'm the boss here, and what I say goes!"

"O. K.," Macklin whispered, his eyes ablaze. "But you can't do this to me—"

Old Growly laughed coarsely. "He says!"

"Yeah. I'll bust this racket of yours wide open. I've worked in Hollywood, Mister. All I've got to say is—just wait!"

The telephone rang. Old Growly answered it. "Yeah, it's me. Whatcha want? Huh? But that super-special's gotta go out tonight, Broscop. You can't . . . oh, he is? Well, that's different. Sure, you can have this new guy for a while. If you want the nuisance of breaking him in. Still, he may have some good ideas. . . . O. K."

Old Growly hung up. "Broscop wants to work with you. Scram outta here. I gotta date. There's a new gambling hell—didn't ya hear me tell ya to get out? The door, see? Out!"

Macklin's impotent fury was arrested when the leprechaun popped in and beckoned urgently. With a parting glare for Old Growly, he followed Broscop into the hall.

"What happened, Tim, me lad?"

Macklin explained as the leprechaun led him through a labyrinth of corridors, past a series of closed doors. Broscop shook his smooth, green grapefruit of a head.

"Better not get too tough with Old Growly. There's only one punishment for insubordination, but that's a dilly. A few days in Hell."

"This *is* Hell," Macklin groaned.

"No, it's another dimension entirely. But there's a transspatial service there."

"There wouldn't be a transspatial service to Earth, would there?"

"Nope. You're here to stay. If you didn't want the job, why'd you sign the contract?"

"I didn't!" Macklin snapped. "Damn it all, I . . . I was missent. I was supposed to go to the Elysian Fields."

"Well, that's your story," the leprechaun said doubtfully. "Here's the office. Take it easy. I'll do all the work till you get used to it. Been a long time since I've seen an Irishman. You wouldn't know the Kerry Dance, would you?"

"Sure." Macklin hummed a few bars. His voice wasn't bad.

Broscop capered with delight. "Och, that does me a world of good! Now sit down; I'll explain. This'll be your office. I'm right next door." He pointed to a door.

Macklin sank into a chair before a desk and glanced around. The room was sparsely furnished, with a dictaphone handy; there were no windows, he noticed.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Write dreams," the leprechaun advised. "Me, I was the greatest minstrel among the Little Folk in my day. That's why I was signed up. It isn't a bad life here. I do Irish dreams mostly. You . . . I dunno. Here's the way we work it." Broscop clicked a button on the dictagraph. "File on Agara Zohn, Sunsa, Rigel. Yeah." He grinned at Macklin. "I'm composing a dream for him . . . we both are, I mean. He's right up my alley. A mystic type." The top of the desk popped open, and a bundle of closely typed cards appeared. Broscop seized the sheaf.

"You see," he explained, "we keep files on everybody. We have to, or people would be dreaming the wrong dreams. That'd never do. We have to write the dreams to fit the psychology of the individual. Let's see this case-history, now. Agara Zohn. As a child, afraid of the dark. Check that. Once was badly clawed by a *zoptanga*. Dissatisfied with his job. He's a hunter. Hates his superior officer—who uses musk perfume. We'll use musk as the dream motif. Subconscious desires . . . hm-m-m. Well, let that go. What's next? Wants power, sure—they all do. Hated his father, but never realized it consciously. How can we work that in?"

Broscop touched the dictaphone button, and the wax cylinder began to spin. "Agara Zohn—rough notes. Mm-m—they're having a heat wave on his planet just now. Start off with Zohn in a volcano. His . . . yeah—I got it! . . . there's a lot of stepping-stones leading to a ladder hanging down inside the crater. No—change that. Cut out the ladder; the censors would be sure to cut it. Make it an elevator. Agara runs across the stepping-stones toward the elevator. Each stone, as he steps on it, turns out to be his father's head. He feels sorry as hell, but he can't do anything about it now. Maybe he goes back to help his old man. It's too late, of course. Tim, reach me that Jung from the shelf, will you? And the Adler beside it. No, not the Freud—he's out-dated. We only use him on New Yorkers. Now —" Broscop turned back to the dictaphone.

"Where was I? Agara goes up in the elevator. He smells musk. It chokes him. There's something crouching on top of the elevator. It's a *zoptanga!* Yeah! Now look, it gets dark all of a sudden. And then . . . and then . . . and then—" The leprechaun slowed down and stopped. After a moment he shrugged.

"That's enough to start on. I'll leave you here. Get acquainted. I'll be in the next office if you want me." He seized the dictaphone roll and scurried out, leaving a dazed Macklin glaring after him.

Merciful Heaven! This was worse than Summit Studio! What sort of damnable poetic justice had landed Macklin here—

He shut his eyes and tried to think. Jerome Dunn, very obviously, was a real magician. But how . . . why—

"First of all," Macklin said silently, "I'll have to work from an impossible premise. Magic. Dunn sent me off to the Elysian Fields and, somehow, I got short-circuited and landed here. Now how did that happen?"

He gave it up, for the while. Instead, he used the telephone and called Old Growly. It was some time before an answer came.

"You!" said Old Growly, in a blaze of furious profanity. "What the devil is it now? I'm a busy man! Who do you think you're—"

"Wait," Macklin said, trying to make his voice friendly. "I just want to ask you something. You say I signed a contract. Can I get a look at it?"

"No, you can't!" Old Growly yelled. "We can't go searching through a mountain of files just to amuse you!"

"But that's just it. There isn't any contract. If you'd only have somebody look and—"

"There *is* a contract or you wouldn't be here. Shut up. If I hear anything from you for at least a week, I'll shoot you to Hell so fast you'll burn to a crisp before you get there."

There was a crash that shook Macklin's eardrum. Seething, he pronged the receiver and let loose with a few soul-satisfying oaths. Of all the unfair, tyrannical—

Wait a minute. It was a bit of shockingly bad luck that Macklin had landed here, of all places, but the blackness of the cloud might indicate a silver lining. Macklin knew the ropes in a Hollywood studio. If the same ropes existed here, he might be able to get out of the mess. Though it seemed quite improbable.

He used the telephone again. "Hello? I want the file on Jerome Dunn, Hollywood, Earth."

"Earth? I'm sorry, sir, but—oh. I remember. Earth! It'll be right up."

A moment later the desk popped open again, and a sheaf of cards was revealed. Macklin fell upon it with avid fingers.

"Jerome Dunn, born April 7, 1896, in Pittsburgh." There was a mass of psychological data which Macklin ignored, for the moment. He was interested in practical, hard facts. And he found them.

"In 1938 Dunn sold his soul to Satan, in exchange for magic powers. Dunn is noted for careless workmanship. Has not the logical mind necessary for an accomplished sorcerer. Actually a dilettante. Works in a very slipshod manner; confuses love potions with blue magic, and makes similar errors. His thoughts are pre-empted by money. Has no sense of loyalty; is completely ruthless in his desire to acquire riches."

Macklin grinned with mirthless fury. "Slipshod—careless workmanship—" So it was Dunn's fault, after all! Macklin thought wildly of the crying need for a strict union among sorcerers. He was the victim of a magician who had done a sloppy job. Instead of going to the Elysian Fields, he was in the dimension of the dream-makers. But why here, of all places?

After pondering vainly for a while, Macklin phoned for a file of information on magical spells. He explained what he wanted. When finally the bulky volume arrived, he found that whole pages had been removed, and lines here and there were blacked out. Censorship, naturally. It was against the rules to work magic here.

He found a few revealing paragraphs—enough to enable him to fit the jig saw together. There were innumerable dimensions, and it was possible to visit most of them by means of certain spells. "The parchment scrip" was cited as one of the methods. If, however, the spell was carelessly made, the person using it would not arrive at his destination. He would be cast out at random into trans-spatial existence. Thence he would gravitate, instantly and naturally, to the plane for which he had the most in common. "A devil would probably fall into Alpha Centauri," said the footnote. "A miser would reach Ghel; a warrior, Valhalla."

Macklin was a writer. So, of course—

"Hell!" he said, with baffled fury, wondering what good this new information would be to him. Very little, he felt sure. What he needed was a way to get out of this impossible world.

And there was no way, unless —unless—

Macklin's eyes brightened. If you fell in a well, you'd scream for help. And you'd scream for somebody with a rope.

Well, there was one man who had such a rope, figuratively speaking. That was Jerome Dunn, Consulting Sorcerer. He might demand an exorbitant sum for rescuing Macklin, but money was certainly no object, under the circumstances. Besides, once Macklin got back to Earth, he could arrange matters to suit himself. His fist clenched, Macklin pounded reflectively against his knee.

How could he get a message through to Dunn? Not by telephone—that was clear. He scowled at the card that lay before him on the desk.

"Jerome Dunn, born April 7, 1896—"

Macklin suddenly gasped in awe of his own brilliance. Of course! That was it! He'd simply compose a dream for Dunn—a dream that would explain the situation to the magician. "Don't write—dream," Macklin paraphrased, and beamed happily.

He whirled to the dictaphone and began to talk rapidly into the mouthpiece.

A half hour later Broscop came back into the office. The little leprechaun was grinning.

"All done, Tim me lad. I just shot it down to the producer. You'll get dream-credit on the job, too." He paused to stare. "Hey, what's going on? Working?"

"Why not? It's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

Broscop picked up Dunn's file cards from the desk. "An Earthman—fair enough. Let's hear what you've got?"

"Sure."

The dictaphone played back. Broscop's expression changed. He looked at Macklin askance.

"What's wrong?"

Broscop stopped the cylinder's revolution. "Och, it's no good! Lad, that'd never pass the board of censors. You don't understand how we work here. Did you study this man Dunn's psychology?" He put a stubby finger on a file card.

"Why—"

"Of course not! Dreams have to be fitted to the individual. Like—well, when I used to compose ballads for Titania, she was always the heroine. And Oberon was hero, except when the two were squabbling. There are rules to follow. The censors are very strict indeed."

"Well," Macklin hesitated, "maybe I can change this a bit—"

Broscop shook his head. "It won't do. No, it won't do at all. Your continuity doesn't fit in with Dunn's psychology the least bit. He wants money, it says. So start, perhaps, with a sequence in which he's Midas. That's a wish-fulfillment dream—if it's a fear dream, you'd handle it different."

Macklin considered. "Do the censors have a dope sheet?"

"A list of what's forbidden? Sure. I'll get me one. You'll have to hew to the line. You won't even be assigned to doing Dunn's dreams unless there's good cause. You may be better suited to handling other types."

"That so? Hm-m-m."

"I've got to report to Old Growly about you—I'll tell him you're getting along swell—and then I'll come back and we can go out for a bite. That suit you?"

"That's fine. Listen, Broscop!"

"What?"

"I've got to be assigned to writing Dunn's dreams. I've just got to!"

The leprechaun bit his lip. "That takes a bit of doing. Let's see, now. If you only had an in with Skull—"

"Who?"

"Skull. He's one of the partners. The only one who's active in the business now. He's the guy who runs this factory, Timothy lad. Tell you what, we'll hunt up Skull tonight and see what we can do. If he takes a shine to you, you can do pretty much as you like. I must scram. Wait here for me."

Macklin waited, brooding blackly, till the small leprechaun returned. "I gave Old Growly the oil," he grinned. "Buttered him up. Said you'd caught on right away."

"Maybe I have," the other remarked cryptically. "What now?"

"We feed. Then we look for Skull. He's probably at one of the hot spots. About the only fun we have," Broscop said mournfully, "is night-clubbing. Still, that ain't hay." He brightened. "Come on. I'm starving."

Macklin was not averse. So far, he had seen nothing of this world but three offices and a hall. But when he was ushered into a dining room, he rather regretted it.

It reminded him of a studio commissary, crowded, noisy, and garishly lighted. That didn't matter. What mattered were the people who thronged it. None of them was human. A rarer assortment of freaks Macklin had never seen.

"You'll get used to 'em," Broscop said, in an amused voice. "Still, maybe we'd better sit in a booth tonight. Over here. Yeah. Ah, the rosy cheeks on ye, mavournin," he ended, and Macklin looked up, startled, to see the leprechaun ogling a waitress with two heads. He gulped and looked away.

"You order for me, Broscop. I . . . how about a drink?"

"Why, sure. A fine idea. Two Hellfire cocktails, double quick and double strong. How do you feel about eels?" the leprechaun inquired suddenly.

Seeing the little man's eyes were fixed on him, Macklin groped for an answer. "Why, I . . . eels? Don't tell me they've got eels working here!"

"For dinner, I mean," Broscop said shortly. "Stewed eels. Not bad, either. How about it?"

"I want a steak, if you've got one."

"Mammoth, cow, or human?" the waitress asked, in an unpleasantly grating voice.

"*Ug*—cow," Macklin said, suppressing a vague nausea.

He was aroused from his apathy by the arrival of the Hellfire cocktails. The liquor went down his throat with a stealthy sort of promise, which was immediately fulfilled in his stomach. The stuff was potent. It warmed. Macklin decided he wanted another.

He drank his way through the dinner, presently arriving at a state of hazy grandeur in which he could bring himself to look at the other diners, inhuman as most of them were. Presently Macklin giggled.

Broscop speared a tasty morsel of eel. "Something?"

"Vampire. Look at her teeth."

"Oh, her," Broscop said. "She's an actress. Plays in nightmares, mostly."

"There's plenty of odd ducks here," Macklin remarked, "but they seem pretty mild, compared to some of the nightmares I've had. I remember one big spider with eyes like soup plates—"

"Technical stuff," the leprechaun murmured. "Special effects. Monsters like that are made in the laboratory and animated. Animated with life force —*aqua vita*. They're all synthetic, of course. Our technicians are plenty clever. I saw a montage effect yesterday that —" He paused. Macklin was no longer listening. He was, instead, several feet away, plowing determinedly through the mob. With a quick bound Broscop caught up with him.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?"

Macklin pointed. "There. Old Growly. Stuffing himself in that booth. Probably eating human flesh. I'm gonna tell him a thing or two."

"Oh-oh," the startled leprechaun whistled. "Listen, Timothy me lad, I think we better get out of here. Right now! Remember, we have to find Skull. He's in a bar. A big, beautiful bar," Broscop tempted. "With lots of liquor in it."

"Gonna see Old Crowly," Macklin objected. "Gonna tell him to pull in his horns." He hesitated, an expression of amazed wonder creeping over his face. Then he laughed delightedly.

"Joke, see? Boy, that's good. Gonna tell him—"

Chuckling gleefully to himself, Macklin allowed Broscop to urge him to the door. Once outside, the night air brought a measure of sobriety. He stared around.

"What happened to the restaurant? Where—"

"We're going to find Skull. Remember?"

"You," said Macklin thickly, "are drunk. Where's a taxi."

There were taxis in this world, apparently, for one drew up almost immediately after Broscop had whistled. Macklin peered vaguely through a cloud of Hellfire cocktails and considered life. It wasn't so bad, considering. Only one thing troubled him. A guy named Dunn. Jerome Dunn. A dirty little magician. A dirty, double-crossing—

"Pull in his horns," Macklin giggled. "That's a dilly."

The taxi drew up before a café ablaze with neon lights. Broscop led his companion into the establishment and located a table.

"Hellfire cocktails," Macklin screamed suddenly, during a lull in the orchestra's din. "Six of 'em."

"Sh-h!" the leprechaun hissed. "You've got four of 'em right before you. Don't you remember ordering them?"

There was something decidedly peculiar about those cocktails. Macklin had drunk almost every known variety of liquor, plain and mixed, but never had he swallowed anything that nullified gravity so easily. He kept floating up off his chair, and had to clutch at the table edge to drag himself down again.

"If I didn't know better," he

remarked to the leprechaun, "I'd think I was floating."

"You are," Broscop told him. "You're not drinking Earthly liquor now. This isn't *uisquebaugh*. Hellfire cocktails, lad, really nullify gravity, just as Styro-liqueur alters you physically."

"It . . . how?"

"Brings out your worst side. It shows," Broscop explained cryptically.

Macklin said something about Jekyll and Hyde, and gulped another drink. This time he actually floated up till his toes got tangled with the tablecloth. A waiter, who was entirely covered with white plush, hurried over and replaced Macklin in his seat.

"I know," the writer said, writhing free of the other's arms. "Don't tell me. You're a werewolf."

"No, sir. I'm a werebear," murmured the waiter, and padded off.

About to reply, Macklin's attention was attracted by a skeleton who sat in a booth some distance away. In his inebriated state, the sight seemed definitely amusing. He pointed out the horror to Broscop.

"You'd think he'd catch cold," Macklin theorized, in a thoughtful manner. "Maybe he's a she. A strip-teaser, eh? I'd hate to be its masseuse, anyway."

"Sh-h!" the leprechaun admonished. "We're in luck."

"In luck!" Macklin stared, astonished. "What are we, grave robbers?"

"That's Skull," Broscop explained. "Remember what I told you? He's the big boss here. Come over and be introduced." He towed Macklin behind him, which wasn't difficult, since the writer had by now, under the influence of the Hellfire cocktails, lost nearly all his weight.

"His tibia's chipped," Macklin remarked. "How do you say hello to a skeleton? Hope he's feeling well? That's plain silly. If I were a skeleton, I'm damn certain I'd be feeling lousy."

"Sh-h! Sir, this is Timothy Macklin. He's a new one. Wants

to present his compliments."

The skeleton looked friendly enough—at least, he was grinning. Macklin felt grateful that the horror did not offer to shake hands.

"Timothy Macklin, eh?" asked a deep, grating voice. "How are you, Timothy Macklin?"

"Oh, I'm fine," said the man, wondering just how drunk he was. "I must be fine. If I wasn't, I couldn't be standing here talking to a fugitive from a graveyard."

Broscop covered up hastily. "He's a little drunk, sir. Hellfire cocktails, you know—"

"He's certainly floating," the skeleton said, eying Macklin with hollow interest.

"I may be drunk, but I'm not dead." Macklin was slightly aggrieved. Here he was, mustering up enough courage and courtesy to talk face to face with a skeleton, and all he got was insults. It was a hell of a note. He wanted another cocktail.

Just then Old Growly appeared, adding a note of further disharmony to the scene. By this time Macklin had lost all sense of caution. He remembered only insults.

Old Growly, ignoring everyone but Skull, sat down beside the skeleton. He waved a casual hand at Macklin and Broscop. "Go away, boys," he rumbled. "We've business to discuss."

Macklin ignored the leprechaun's frantic tugs. He looked around, located a bowl of pretzels on a nearby table, and annexed them. Then he took a careful stance and began tossing pretzels at Old Growly, trying to ring the creature's horns.

"Timothy me lad! In the name of Titania, come away!"

"Have a pretzel," Macklin invited. "Win a prize. Ha! A ringer!"

Old Growly carefully disengaged a pretzel from his left horn. He eyed Macklin up and down with slow hatred.

"I know you," he said.

"To know me is to love me," Macklin remarked at random. "Who asked you to horn in anyway—" He broke off to laugh wildly. "Horn in. Get it? Where was I? Oh, yeah—this is a private party, crocodile-puss, and you're not invited."

Old Growly seemed about to explode. Skull nodded to the leprechaun.

"Better get your friend out of here. He's only a writer, isn't he? Well, you ought to know that directors take precedence over writers."

"I've eaten marrow out of better specimens than you," Macklin said insultingly, his annoyance now transferred to the skeleton. "Don't interrupt, or I'll sic a worm on you." He writhed free of Broscop's clutch, and a sudden bound sent him shooting up to the ceiling, where he remained, maintaining his altitude by paddling slightly with his feet. He stared down at upturned faces—Old Growly's horned one, the leprechaun's small green face, and the skull. "I," he announced, "rise to make a few remarks. You can't treat me like one of your contract men. I don't belong here. I was framed. And if you don't send me back to Earth pronto, I'll raise so much hell here that—"

Old Growly bellowed, "Where is the bouncer?"

Across the room something swooped—Dracula, Macklin thought in abrupt panic. It was black and shapeless and had the wings of a bat. He felt hard talons grip him, and fought frantically to free himself.

"Throw him out," Skull said quietly.

Macklin felt himself being towed through the air. He caught a glimpse of Broscop's horrified little face—and then the lights went out entirely. The ghosts of sixteen Hellfire cocktails drowned his senses in blackness.

Macklin felt much better for his spree, even though he awoke in Hell. His nerves were no longer under that unendurable nervous tension. He no longer doubted his own sanity. Liquor had purged and cleansed his mind till he could calmly accept the existence of magic, without falling back on psychoses and neuroses.

There were two drawbacks, though. One was Macklin's hangover. The other was his surroundings—most disturbing. He felt uncomfortably hot, and, when he opened his eyes, the reason was obvious. He was in Hell.

The sky, far above his head, was of seething flames—tides of fire that rolled endlessly across the vault, with a noise of distant thunder. An acrid, sulphurous odor made him choke.

He sat up, giddy with sudden vertigo, and looked around. He was on a . . . a plateau. The black metal on which he sat was painfully warm. He was, apparently, on an island.

No. Perspective came back. He was atop a gigantic tower, and the ground was shockingly far down. He walked gingerly toward the edge, stopping well away from it. Beneath him a black city lay. It was a city ringed with flame, and the sounds that drifted faintly up to Macklin made him shiver a bit. Yes—this was Hell.

The heat was growing worse. Tongues of flame licked up, searing and blinding. Macklin instinctively dodged. He—

Woosh!

He was no longer in Hell. He was lying, fully clothed, on a rather hard bed, and the small green face of the leprechaun was hanging above him like a Christmas tree light.

"Thought it was time for you to get back," Broscop sighed. "They only gave you twenty-four hours in Hell. Och, lad, why didn't you listen to me?"

Macklin sat up. He was in a huge dormitory, filled with rows of beds, but otherwise empty.

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Broscop was perched on the head-rail, looking worried.

"You're all right?"

"I . . . yeah. I think so. W-what happened?"

"Get up; you need food. And coffee. It'll be time to work soon, anyway."

"Work?" Macklin groaned at the thought, but obediently rose and followed Broscop into a washroom. There he made a hasty toilet, and was presently seated in the commissary, gulping down black coffee and shakily smoking a cigarette.

"It was thus," Broscop explained. "After you insulted Skull and Old Growly—you do remember that, don't you? Well, you were given a leave in Hell as a punishment. Insubordination's a serious crime here. How'd you get on?"

Macklin said it wasn't so bad.

"Eh? Oh, I see. You were lucky. You slept through most of your sentence."

"Just where was I?"

"On the tallest tower of the City Dis. That's where we're always sent. If we got closer to the ground, we'd be singed to cinders. You'd best mind your p's and q's from now on, lad—Old Growly hates you, and Skull has no reason to love you. Why did you act that way? You wanted to ask a favor of Skull, and—"

"That's right," Macklin said, biting his lip. "I did. I wanted to get assigned to writing Dunn's dreams."

"Have some more coffee," Broscop urged. "You can't go around here asking favors now, very well. You'll get assigned to writing for your own psychology group, and that's that."

The coffee was clearing Macklin's head. For the first time in months he felt calm and clear-headed. The morning after was always a good time to plan.

"Broscop," he said thoughtfully, "I've kicked around Hollywood for some years. And I'm a pretty bright lad. Don't lose any sleep over me. I even used to write movie serials, and after you've done that, nothing's a problem. This business, now—" He stood up. "Let's go. I want to get to work."

Leprechaun and human went out into bright morning sunlight. Staring up, Macklin had a well-founded suspicion that the "sun" was something in the nature of an arc light, affixed to a . . . a ceiling. The world of the dream-makers was a curious one in many ways.

On the way they passed a set where actors were already working. The scenery reminded Macklin of Caligari, cubistic and distorted. From every window eyes peered. An oddly shaped camera was grinding away steadily—it reminded Macklin strongly of Hollywood.

Then — *something* — scuttled out of a doorway and hobbled rapidly down the street, and Macklin changed his mind. This wasn't Hollywood. It was the place where nightmares were made.

Broscop finally deposited him in his office and vanished. Macklin went quickly to the desk, but the file on Jerome Dunn was gone—returned to its usual place, no doubt. He picked up the phone, smiling crookedly.

"Hello? Get me the file on Jerome Dunn again. Yeah. And the one on Timothy Macklin—Hollywood, Earth. That's right. And send up some blank cards, too. Oh—I want to add a few things. Sure I've got authority," he bluffed, and sat back with a sigh of relief. Presently he sprang into activity, hunting for a typewriter. It was concealed inside the desk, but leaped out at him when he pushed the right button.

The file cards arrived. Macklin studied his own, his brow wrinkling. "Good heavens," he muttered. "Is that me? Oh, well—" He shoved a fresh card into the typewriter and went to work. Much of the information he copied verbatim. But the psychological data he cut out entirely, typing in its stead certain items from Dunn's card.

It was finished at last. Macklin chuckled. According to the records—the slightly altered records!—Jerome Dunn and Timothy Macklin were kindred souls, with almost identical psychology patterns. It was, therefore, only logical that Macklin be assigned to writing Dunn's dreams.

He sent the card files back, via the magic desk, and shrugged. Nothing to do now but wait. He lit a cigarette—there were still several in his case—and wandered into Broscop's office. The little leprechaun was pacing the floor, glaring at the dictaphone and rubbing his eyes angrily.

"In trouble?"

"I've got to fit in an old dream—and it doesn't fit. Sure, we use old dreams," Broscop nodded, perching himself on the edge of the desk. "Figure it out for yourself. We supply dreams for every intelligent creature in the universe—and that's plenty. Even working on double shifts, we couldn't have a new dream for each person every night—or every week."

"I'd wondered about that," Macklin admitted.

"Time helps. Time has very little to do with dreams. A one-reel dream may last all night, but on the other hand, it's possible to dream a ten-reeler in half a second. Here's how it's done, Timothy me lad. Yesterday I wrote a dream for Agara Zohn, on Rigel. He's had it last night. Tonight the dream goes to—let's see—at least a thousand people of the same psychology pattern as Zohn. Not on Rigel, of course. Betelgeuse, Avalon, Venus—all over. Tomorrow night, the same thing. Eventually there aren't any people of Zohn's pattern left. But there are plenty who are *almost* identical. The dream just needs a few changes to be applicable to them. We keep stock shots on file for such cases. The original dream

is cut and changed as it goes down the line, till finally it's unrecognizable. But in each case it fits the individual. See?"

"Vaguely," said Macklin. "Maybe I can help you with this job. After all, I've got to learn the business."

They worked together for a while. It wasn't too difficult. Macklin was catching on, and Broscop was grateful for the help.

"I'm wondering something," Macklin interrupted after a while. "How about audience reaction? Don't you keep track of that?"

"Sure. We stick in test-dream sequences sometimes. Disguised questions, especially when we are not quite certain about the dreamer's psychology. An individual changes, naturally . . . well, take this case. There's a question about his pet neuroses—claustrophobia. He's just been imprisoned in a lightless dungeon on Mercury, and that'll either kill or cure him. I'll run a test to find out how he's changed." Broscop turned to the dictaphone. "Sequence seven, pan shot. Inquisition scene. Word association test. Check time lapses carefully. Send this sequence back to writer for reclassification after preview. Test follows: Sun, stars, moon, *ladz*, wall, shell, eclipse, pressure—"

A bell rang in Macklin's office. Broscop broke off to say, "That's an assignment for you. If you need help, sing out."

"Thanks," said Macklin, and went out. On his desk a card lay. It said:

"Timothy Macklin—classification 7-B-132-JJ-90. Any persons in this code number are suitable as material. Warning: Don't write dreams for any other group. Ask Information if in doubt."

Macklin used the phone. Information said: "I'll send up the files for that group. There's a lot of them. Do you want them alphabetically or geographically?"

"Alphabetically. The D's."

"Yes, sir. Do you have a copy of the censorship code? No? I'll send that, too."

The desk popped again. There was a drawer of cards visible, labeled "Daaaaaa-Daaaaab." There was also a closely typewritten sheet. Macklin seized the last and sent back the cards.

"I want the Du index, please."

"There are fourteen of them, sir. Which—"

"Dunn," Macklin said desperately. "Jerome Dunn."

He got what he wanted at last. The drawer was labeled, 7-B-132-JJ-90—Dunm—Duno." Thumbing through the cards, Macklin gasped with relief when he found one headed "Jerome Dunn, born April 7, 1896." So Dunn was within his jurisdiction, thanks to his tampering with the file record of his own history!

All that was necessary now was to compose a code message in a dream for Dunn. That was all—except for the necessity of avoiding trouble with the censors.

Macklin thumbed through the censorship code. There were innumerable and fantastic restrictions. No kiss could last longer than two seconds. Kissing was forbidden in Japan. No dreams involving light-vibration could be used in a place named Spodgerblu, in the Coal Sack. Dreams must hew strictly to the psychology of the individual—

Macklin picked up Dunn's card and studied it. Could he find a loophole? An apparent reason for running a test-dream sequence? And one that would serve his purpose? Let's see—

There was a new entry on the card, since Macklin had last read it. "Dunn recently refused an offer of fifty thousand dollars to appear in a motion picture."

So? And Dunn's chief trait seemed to be avarice. That didn't jibe. It was a question—just the question Macklin

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needed. Had Dunn's psychology pattern been altered?

He picked up the dictaphone mouthpiece. "Insert sequence on Jerome Dunn. Test scene. Send back to writer after . . . uh . . . preview." Macklin paused, suddenly struck by the madness of the situation in which he found himself. Writing dreams for a magician. He tightened his lips and went on thoughtfully:

"An Inquisition scene. No. Change that." It wouldn't jibe with Dunn's background. "Make it a Black Mass. Satan questioning Dunn." He went on more easily as he got into the swing of the work. One thought troubled him: how could he convey the message? How could he bring in a reference to himself without running afoul of the censors?

By symbolism, of course!

What symbol—hm-m-m! A postdated check for five thousand dollars. That would almost certainly represent Macklin in Dunn's mind. Yeah. Well, then—

It was done at last. Not only the test sequence, but the complete dream. It was a lovely thing, based soundly on Dunn's inner self, involving an earthquake that crumbled all the banks in Hollywood and sent tons of gold and bills showering out in the streets, where Dunn himself, the only person awake at the time, was scampering about busily with a wheelbarrow. He carried the treasure load by load to his cellar. With a touch of malice, Macklin turned the money into pebbles and overdue bills. It was a fear-dream.

He asked Broscop for an opinion, and the leprechaun listened to the play-back and chuckled. "You're catching on. That's fine, Timothy lad."

"The censors won't—"

"They won't. A few minor changes, though, maybe. Better cut out the reference to that gold tooth. Teeth are a bit risky. Otherwise fine. Shoot the stuff down to a producer now, and that's all there is to it."

The phone rang. Macklin picked up the receiver. "Yeah?"

"I'm sending up another file card on Jerome Dunn—it was mislaid. You had his docket this morning, didn't you?"

"That's right."

The desk popped. A card lay there, covered with typewritten notes. Macklin scanned it.

"Add history Jerome Dunn," it said. "Subheading 'Slipshod Magic.' Dunn accidentally mixed arsenic in a love-potion for a man named—" There was much more of the same. But several items were of especial interest.

"Trans-spatial work very sloppy. Dunn has lost six people through carelessly prepared scrips. (He uses the parchment scrip method.) One Michael MacBryan, ticketed for a visit to Heaven, landed in the Egyptian Hell through error. Dunn learned of his mistake but refused to rescue MacBryan, afraid of the consequences. Feared MacBryan might sue him. Five other similar cases. One landed in Davy Jones' Locker—"

"What's the matter?" Broscop asked.

Macklin gulped. "Nothing. Just a slight kick in the face. From a rat. It's bad enough to make mistakes, but a guy ought to try and fix 'em up afterward, oughtn't he?"

"Huh?"

"Let it lay. I'm not feeling so good, pal. What about some more Hellfire cocktails?"

"Well," the leprechaun said doubtfully, "all right. But you know what happened last time."

"It won't happen again," Macklin swore—and he was right.

It didn't happen again. There was no trouble. Seated in a bar, Macklin steadily drank Hellfire cocktails till he floated up to the ceiling and passed out. Some

time later, he awoke in his own bed in the studio dormitory. He had a hangover, as usual, but breakfast and black coffee remedied the trouble.

He was anxious to get to his office. On his desk there was a note of commendation from Old Growly himself, together with a transcribed document. Broscop laughed delightedly.

"See? It says 'Good Work.' And it's initialed O. G. You'll be a director yet, Timothy me lad."

"Sure," Macklin said, absently lighting a cigarette. He was studying the other paper. It was the report on the test scene he had inserted in Dunn's dream.

He sent for the magician's card file billet, and then brooded over the report. Broscop tiptoed into his own office. Macklin's eyes narrowed; he blew smoke through his nostrils and cursed under his breath. The report was not encouraging.

It was in the form of a running dialogue between Satan and Dunn. Dunn, of course, had supplied the answers himself, but Macklin had written the questions—

Q. (by Satan). "You promised to serve me?"

A. (by Dunn). "That's right."

Q. "You sold me your soul in return for magical powers?"

A. "Sure. So I could get money. I love money. It's wonderful."

Q. "You have not changed your mind?"

A. "Who says so?"

Q. "You were offered a large sum to star in a motion picture, and yet you refused it. Why?"

A. "You ought to know. If that film ever showed in St. Louis or Chicago, the police would try to extradite me. My . . . uh . . . magic didn't work so well then."

Q. "Do you value money more than loyalty or honesty?"

A. "That's plain silly."

Q. "If you failed to deliver the goods to a customer, would you refund the money?"

A. "Well—if it came to court—I suppose—"

Q. "If one of your customers got in trouble—"

A. "I know what you mean. The poison in those love potions. Just an accident. That was all. And those chaps who landed in the wrong dimensions. Well, I hadn't inscribed the parchments exactly right, but—so what? If I'd brought those guys back to Earth, they might have sued me. Or insisted on their money back. It's my money and nobody can have it but me."

Q. "How about a postdated check for five thousand dollars?"

A. "Uh—I remember. Well, that makes seven. I guess he had the wrong scrip. I dunno where he is now. I haven't time to look for him in every dimension. Besides, I can't cash the check for three days yet. And if Macklin came back and talked, it'd hurt my reputation. People would stop paying me money. That would never do."

The catechism continued, but there was a little else to be learned. Macklin sat back with a sigh. He was right. Jerome Dunn was a dirty, double-crossing rat. The magician realized what he'd done, and simply refused to remedy matters.

Then—Macklin's eyes hardened—sterner measures were justified. Dunn deserved a severe kick in the teeth. The only trouble was the obvious difficulty of delivering it.

Item, Macklin wanted to get back to Earth.

Item, he had lost his return ticket.

Ergo, he had to get another.

How?

Macklin began to sing softly under his breath. A slow smile broadened on his face.

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He jumped up and fled into Broscop's office. The leprechaun was cursing the dictaphone.

"Broscop!"

"*Whup!* Oh, it's you. Don't jump out on a leprechaun like that. What's wrong?"

"Listen, you say insubordination here is punished in only one way?"

"Sure—a trip to Hell. Why?"

"Whereabouts in Hell? That tower?"

"The tallest tower of Dis. Always."

"Suppose I punched Old Growly in the nose. Would I be sent there?"

"You would," Broscop said, chuckling.

"No other place?"

"The tower is the only place. Why? *Hey!* You don't intend to—"

"Not yet, anyway," Macklin said, and returned to his office. There he used the phone.

"Information on souls sold to Satan? Yes, sir. I'll send the volume up immediately."

It was a large book, profusely and unpleasantly illustrated. Presently Macklin found the information he wanted.

"When Satan buys a soul, he holds it as security. It is preserved in the Ammonia Crater, frozen stiff, until the death of the original owner. When that happens, the life force enters the soul, and the soul enters into its period of torment."

Another item said, "Such souls are perfect replicas of the body, except that they are dead-white, like ectoplasm. The Ammonia Crater is always well guarded, for men have been known to attempt to recapture their souls. None have succeeded. Satan objects to being cheated. If a man could reclaim his soul from the Ammonia Crater, he could, of course, enter into Heaven in his due time. But—"

Macklin grinned ferociously. He turned to the dictaphone, slid a roll on to the cylinder, and began to dictate.

"Dream for Jerome Dunn. Set it in Hell. On top of the tallest tower of Dis. Fake Dunn's soul. Or—better yet. Start with the Ammonia Crater." He talked fast, ending at last, "Hurry this up. I want to see the rushes before it goes out."

Two hours later Macklin sat in a projection room, little Broscop by his side. The leprechaun was excited.

"Why, you've got dream-credit! Swell! And approved by the board of censors! Timothy me lad, you'll make your mark in this world—"

Macklin didn't answer. He was watching the drama on the screen unfold.

It started with a montage of Hell—clever trick technical stuff. Then there was a fade-in to the Ammonia Crater, where stacks of frozen souls were piled up in rows. The camera panned down to a soul at the end of a row. It was milky white, but otherwise was a perfect double for Jerome Dunn.

Over the edge of the crater a tongue of flame licked. It touched the frozen soul, bathing it in fire. The soul stirred, visibly thawing. And then, abruptly, it leaped up and sprang high into the air. Over Hell it soared, heading for the black city Dis.

It came to rest on the summit of the tallest tower. And there it lay, motionless, panting a little.

The scene changed, becoming more conventional. It turned into an ordinary nightmare. But threaded through the dream, like a motif, were shots of Dunn's soul resting on the dark tower of Dis.

"Bait," Macklin said silently. "Broscop, when will that dream go out?"

The leprechaun called a question. From the projection room a voice answered.

"There's a print being rushed to Earth now. It's due for a *première* tonight."

"O. K.," Macklin said. He turned and gripped Broscop's hand.

"Good luck. In case—anything happens. You're a swell guy, Broscop, and thanks for everything."

"But . . . but Timothy, me lad—"

Macklin was already gone. He went directly to Old Growly's office. The horned creature was squatting behind his desk, smoking a gigantic cigar.

He looked up. "You! I'm busy. Get out. Phone for an appointment."

Macklin's answer was audible but inarticulate. He vibrated his tongue rapidly between his lips.

Old Growly bellowed like a bull. He sprang up, circled the desk, and faced Macklin. That was what the man had been awaiting.

"You crawling little sea-slug! By Baal and Beelzebub, I'll not have insubordination in my own depar—"

"Why not send me to Hell?" Macklin suggested.

"*Uk . . . uk . . .* I will! I'll give you a month! Two months! I—"

"That's the worst you can do? It is? Well, then!" Macklin smiled happily, poised himself, and rammed a hard fist into Old Growly's unpleasant face. He felt a delightful *thwack* against his knuckles, and his eardrums were almost pierced by the agonized yell Old Growly let out. Macklin stepped back and waited, ready for attack.

No attack came. Old Growly staggered back to his desk, clutching at a pulped nose, and furiously rang bells and pushed buttons. He howled commands into the dictagraph.

"Get the studio police! Quick! There's a maniac in my office! A homicidal maniac! Hurry—"

There was a movement behind Macklin; he felt his arms seized. Old Growly sank into his chair, panting. His gaze dripped vitriol.

"Five years in Hell for you. Five long years," he sputtered. "Take him away. Get him out of my sight!" His voice rose to a shrill scream. "Take him away before he wrecks the joint!"

Macklin was urged toward the door. He waved blithely at Old Growly.

"So long, pal. Hell will be a rest cure after this abattoir. Look it up," he advised. "You'll find a dictionary in the library, if you know how to read."

The door closed. Someone said, "Five years in Hell is a long stretch, buddy. I feel sorry for you."

Macklin yawned—

Even fifteen hours in Hell was unpleasant. The tower of Dis kept getting hotter. It burned Macklin's feet. The parched, acrid air made him thirsty. He paced back and forth, scowling, wondering if his plans would go wrong.

Time dragged on, slowing down by visible degrees. The tides of flame raced across the vault of the sky. Faint noises drifted up from below. Five years in Hell—ugh! Macklin was beginning to be worried.

If he had failed—

No, he couldn't have failed. Psychology couldn't be wrong. Logic was logic. X plus x equals 2x. On the other hand, x times x equals x^2. Maybe he had added when he should have multiplied.

But the bait he had used was sure-fire. Dunn had dreamed that his soul—in pawn to Satan—had escaped from the Ammonia Crater and was hiding atop this very tower. He wouldn't scent a trap. He'd want to reclaim his soul and cheat Satan of his bargain.

On the other hand, Dunn might believe that the dream was simply so much guff—a wish-fulfillment vision. Could be. Yet, even if Dunn consciously thought that, he would also realize that there *was* a chance that the vision might be founded in fact. It would cost nothing to investigate. Dunn would sense

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no danger. Why should he? He would see the bait, hesitate—and then walk into the trap.

Perhaps—

Twenty feet away a pillar of black smoke sprang into existence. Macklin saw it from the corner of his eye. His breath catching in his throat, he whirled and raced toward the inky cloud. Hidden in the darkness, he could make out the vague outline of a man. The smoke cleared—

Dunn!

The magician stood motionless, a bit of charred parchment visible in his right hand. In his left he held a fresh, unburned roll. The beady little eyes were alight with greed. But before they could blink away the smoke, Macklin acted. He swooped on the startled magician like a vulture and tore the parchment roll from his hand.

Dunn said, "Hey! What—"

Macklin's cigarette lighter was ready. "I'm just letting the punishment fit the crime, pal," he snapped—and touched flame to the scrip. Dunn yelled and leaped forward, too late. A burst of greasy black smoke billowed out.

The magician's voice seemed to fade into immeasurable distance. Macklin opened his eyes, which stung painfully. He was back in Dunn's parlor, in exactly the same spot where he had burned the first parchment days before.

The room was otherwise empty. Morning sunlight slanted in through the windows. Distantly Macklin heard the hum of traffic from Hollywood Boulevard.

He pocketed the cigarette lighter. "Dunn!" he called softly.

No answer.

"Dunn!"

Macklin shivered slightly and hastened to let himself out of the house—

The disappearance of Jerome Dunn, Consulting Sorcerer, caused a slight tumult in Hollywood circles for a few weeks, but soon the matter was forgotten. Events moved on as usual. Betsi Gardner, the movie columnist, ran a brief squib in her paper, and Timothy Macklin returned to work, feeling vastly refreshed by his vacation. "Just ran down to Mexico for a while," he explained airily. "What's on the docket? Oh, I feel fine now. I just got a bit stale, I guess."

His career thereafter was an enviable one. Eventually he married Betsi Gardner. Five years exactly after Macklin's return from Hell, he woke up in the night yelling at the top of his voice.

Betsi snapped on the light. "Tim! What's the matter?"

Macklin stared around wildly. "Huh? Oh. I—nothing, honey. Just a bad dream."

"It must have been a nightmare!"

"Yeah . . . say, what's the date?"

Betsi told him. Macklin looked thoughtful.

"Just five years to the day. So he's been in Hell ever since—and now he's back in my old job."

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

"Nothing—on Earth," Macklin said cryptically. "I just got a . . . well, a message from an old friend. Go to sleep, Betsi."

"Sure you're all right?"

"Well—yeah. Quite all right. Only I expect I'll do a good deal of dreaming from now on. Still—sticks and stones will break my bones, but dreams will never hurt me."

Betsi lay back and closed her eyes, rather puzzled. She drifted back into slumber . . . then, startled, she awoke. Her husband was softly singing himself to sleep:

"If anyone anything lacks,
He'll find it all ready in stacks,
If he'll only look in
On the resident Djinn,
Number seventy, Simmery Axe!"

THE END.

★ ★

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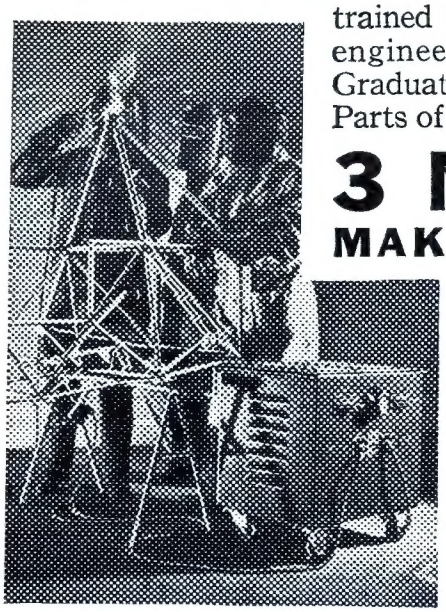

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